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MARK GRUENWALD
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ROCKY & BULLWINKLE'S
JUNE FORAY

FROM COMPUTERS TO COMICS —
NEIL HARRIS
ATARI'S MARKETING MASTER

#54

DAVID ANTHONY KRAFT'S

COMICS INTERVIEW

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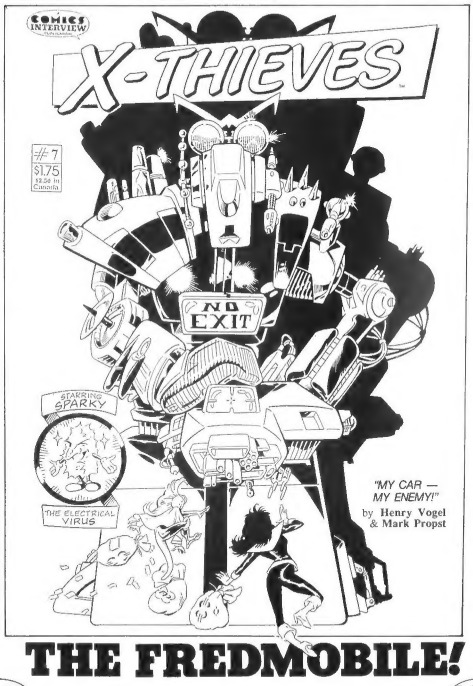

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-Dwight

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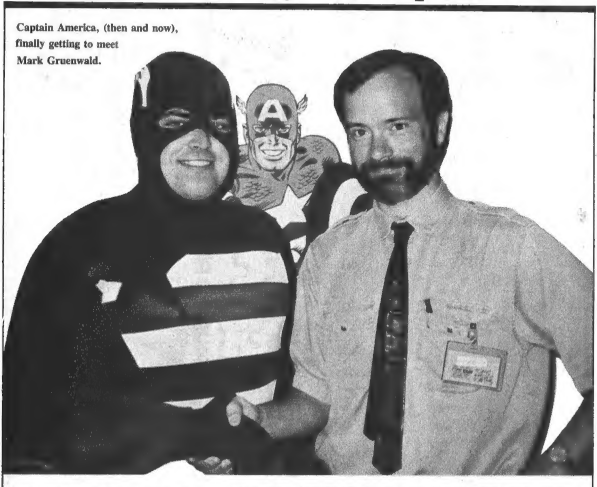
"Incidentally, I've written more CAPTAIN AMERICA than anyone except Stan Lee."



Captain America, (then and now), finally getting to meet Mark Gruenwald.

MARK GRUENWALD

For years Mark Gruenwald has been known to just about everyone in the business as Mr. Marvel Universe. Then came the New Universe, a new Captain America, and now a new New Universe. And on top of that, Mark is now Marvel's Executive Editor. Stripping Steve Rogers of his Captain America identity put Mark on the hate mail list of fans who loved the original Cap. And his role in what amounts to a re-creation of the New Universe — a line of comics which he had a hand in creating in the first place — has brought even greater attention to him, because the revamping is so drastic.

So what's going on here? Is Mark a comic book industry Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde? Will the phrase "pulling a Grunie" become the catch phrase for sensational, extreme and unexpected changes with a character or concept? Perhaps. Considering all the things that Mark was doing, it was high time that Comics Interview got the low-down on how all these things came about — and in one marathon session in Mark's office, that's just what happened.

DWIGHT JON ZIMMERMAN: *The first thing that I'd like to talk about is CAPTAIN AMERICA, which has turned into a pretty hot item now. Even the back issue prices are going up.*

MARK GRUENWALD: That's no surprise, I designed it that way. *(Laughter.)* I've been writing Cap for about three years now, and in my opinion the quality of the work has been pretty uniform. But now suddenly it's selling. Why? Because I decided to pull out all stops and resort to every attention-getting device I knew. I have a theory that there are only three things that a writer can do to make an immediate dramatic sales difference. The most obvious thing an *editor* can do is to take an artist and replace him with a more popular artist — that's not to say better, more popular — but that's not something a writer can do. So, my theory of what a writer can do to goose sales involves three *cheap tricks* — capital C, capital T. Trick number one — change the main character's costume. That *always* attracts attention. I did that with Cap.

GREG: And Wonder Man.

MARK: Sometimes it attracts attention in

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"I used cheap tricks to boost sales."

a bad way, as in Wonder Man's case. The second trick is to kill off someone major. That'll always wake people up and at least make that issue sell. It won't necessarily affect the following issues, whereas the new costume may actually have an accumulative effect, as long as it's not a one-issue wonder. The third thing is *replace* the title character, so that you have the illusion of change. So, out of those tricks that I've long recognized are the immediate sales boosters, I've done two.

GREG: No, three.

MARK: Scourge doesn't count. I did two of the three cheap tricks designed to boost sales, and *surprise! surprise!* it boosted sales.

DWIGHT: *But aside from the crass commercial reason, and to get more royalty money, what —*

MARK: No, it's not a totally crass reason. I love Captain America and I desperately wanted his book to survive. CAPTAIN AMERICA has not been as good a seller as Marvel would want, for reasons not entirely known to me. It and HULK were the lowest selling books from the **Stan Lee** era. This seemed strange to me because, thanks to the popularity of **Ronald Reagan**, we are living in a more patriotic time. Here was the original patriotic character, and still no one was buying his magazine. I said, "Why is this?"

DWIGHT: *Yeah, a lot of others were thinking the same thing. About two years ago they were seriously considering canceling Cap, and a lot of people went up to then Editor-in-Chief Jim Shooter to say, "You can't cancel Cap." I think you were one of those people.*

MARK: Yeah. I was fighting to preserve the continuity in the sense of the number-

VITAL STATISTICS

Date of Birth: June 18, 1953
Place of Birth: Oshkosh, Wisconsin
Credits: Executive Editor at Marvel Comics
Scripter (past) on: SPIDER-WOMAN, MARVEL TWO-IN-ONE, THOR, SQUADRON SUPREME Ltd Series, HAWKEYE Ltd Series, a few WHAT IFs (current) CAPTAIN AMERICA, D.P.7
Penciler (past): HAWKEYE Ltd Series
Most Embarrassing Moment: I once confessed to then Editor-in-Chief Jim Shooter that I had some difficulty editing Denny O'Neil on IRON MAN since I used to be Denny's mere assistant. Denny happened to pass by so Jim called him in, and said, "Mark here finds it intimidating to edit you." Jim meant to solve my problem with Denny, I guess.
Most Common Question Asked You At Conventions: "How can I get to work for Marvel Comics?"
Most Esoteric Marvel Universe Fact You Know: (Without having to look it up) The Controller was born in Kittery Point, Maine? The Grandmaster's real name is En Dwi Gast? The Monitors are from the planet Marvan? I give up.
Most Aggravating Part of Working on the MARVEL UNIVERSE HANDBOOK: No matter how hard we research and how many times we proofread, there's still an average of 1 mistake or proofo per page.
Most Enjoyable Part of Working on the MARVEL UNIVERSE HANDBOOK: Seeing it all done and sitting on my reference shelf.

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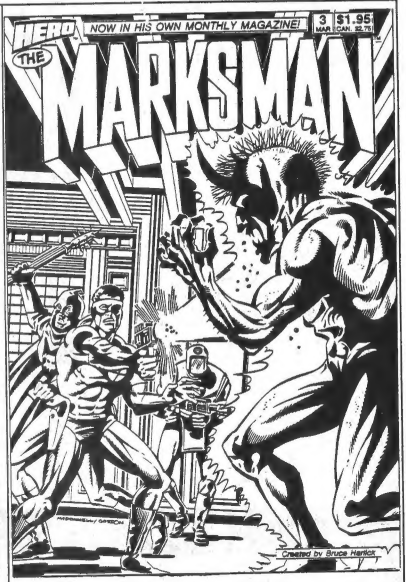

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"Cap is our equivalent to Superman."

ing, which is one of DC's favorite cheap tricks to make a sales difference — cancel it and start over with #1. That's one of the three cheap tricks of publishing, which I won't get into since I'm not a publisher. *(Laughter.)* So the reason I resorted to the cheap tricks was because I *love* Captain America. I couldn't figure out why I couldn't get more people enthusiastic about the book, so I decided I'd do the cheap tricks to get 'em reading, and then maybe they'll stay around because it's an intriguing ongoing story line. I mean the cheap tricks can't work unless the story line merits it. You can't just have Daredevil swing down the street and say, "I think I'll get a pink costume this month." It's got to be an integral part of the story line. I concocted a very extenuating set of circumstances for the costume change, and for Cap's replacement. I think the storyline is a logical outgrowth of what I have been doing on the book for the last three years.

Incidentally, with the issue I've just scripted (#342) I've written more CAPTAIN AMERICA than anyone except **Stan Lee**. I've got many years to go if I'm to do more than **Stan Lee**. What is the significance? Not much. All it's saying is that in the last 20 years people haven't stayed on the book for more than three years. **Englehart** and **DeMatteis** did about three years, 34 or 35 issues and an annual or two. Other than Stan, who did all of the TALES OF SUSPENSE stories and the first 30 or 40 issues of CAPTAIN AMERICA — modern CAPTAIN AMERICA; I don't know anything about the '40s, how many he did there, so those don't count in my calculations. No one stayed with it long enough to really leave an imprint, to get him going in one consistent direction. Consistency is very important in comic books, and Cap just never had that going for him. There was a period in which no writer did more than three or four issues, so he was almost a schizophrenic character. Well, I love Captain America — he's my favorite character. I'm going to stick with him until they force me off, and as Executive Editor I'll make sure they don't force me off, because I'm part of the *they!*

DWIGHT: *What do you think was the big reason why CAPTAIN AMERICA might not have been selling? Was his patriotic theme outdated in some way?*

MARK: I have two theories on that. First, he is a real boy scout. We're in the age of Rambo and Wolverine; callous disregard for human life, whatever it takes to get the job done, killer instinct. Captain America is not like that. He's

Mark scripted this Avengers tale.

Marvel's most archetypal character, our equivalent to Superman, as far as purity and goodness and integrity and moral behavior, and even in today's patriotic times that's looked upon as fuddy-duddy. I mean Rambo's going out there and defying his superiors and mowing down VC or whatever, and *that's* patriotic. **Reagan** makes references to Rambo, so that must be the current age's take on patriotism. And Captain America, despite the fact that he has one of the five greatest costumes in comics and has a great name and good origins and is a solid concept, is just *perceived* as an old-timer.

DWIGHT: *Perhaps even out of step?*

MARK: Yeah, out of step with the times, because he's still a boy scout in an age where boy scouts aren't perceived as being able to get the job done. It certainly doesn't seem to get things done in the world political situation. So I tried to address that perception of Cap in small ways. Before I began the current storyline, I tried to refine Cap's *modus operandi* and get rid of all of the excess baggage accumulated around him over the years, so that the concept of the book could be one man, one mission, one country, there he goes. I set up a way for him to respond to the American people through his computer hot-line, rather than having him get cast-off jobs from the Avengers or S.H.I.E.L.D. I can't begin to count how many past stories began with a villain coming up to Cap and bothering him. Cap is an avenger, not a victim! A victim sits there and lets people attack him. An avenger goes out and avenges something. I wanted Cap to be an avenger, not a victim, and the hotline was my way to put him in control.

I also wanted him to get out and around **America**. I took away everything that made him Captain Manhattan or Captain Brooklyn Heights. I took away his Brooklyn Heights apartment so that his home could be America. I took away all the supporting characters that tied him to New York. I had him get a MIAMI VICE haircut so he wouldn't look so square. I got rid of Nomad, who had been a component of the series for a while because Nomad made Cap seem old. Cap had to take the mentor relationship with Nomad, and he was coming off as everyone's favorite father figure rather than as the active vital superhero. I didn't want Cap to be perceived as "old-fashioned," but in certain ways — his moral code, for instance — he *is* old-fashioned. That's why I think he was not clicking despite the

"The response was amazing. I never

patriotic times. He was too traditional. It's nice to know that I've finally done something to get the book noticed, and now maybe some of the things going on will keep people reading even after the story line resolves. Amazing as it seems, there is a sizable chunk of our audience that believes that every change is permanent — that **Steve Rogers** is never going to be Cap again. I guess we've done enough changes that *were* permanent that we've got our audience conditioned to believe all changes are permanent, but the truth of the matter is that every change is permanent only until we think of the *next* change which is permanent.

DWIGHT: *Except people don't come back from the dead in real life.*

MARK: That's true. With IRON MAN, for example, we had James Rhodes take the lead character's place, and we did it for two years — which I'm sure was about a year and a half longer than anybody thought we would do it. In THOR we had Beta Ray Bill take Thor's place for two or three issues. So, this is the sort of thing that has been done to shake up people before. You know, I'm responsible for it in IRON MAN and I was editor of THOR at the time of Beta Ray Bill, and believe me it's a trick I know *works* because I've seen it work a number of times. It's just to get you noticed so that people who don't normally read it will say, "Oh, I heard something about this, let me read it and see." And with luck, folks will get hooked on the storyline.

DWIGHT: *Well, isn't there a tendency to grab for, for lack of a better phrase, a headline item simply because everybody — from writers, editors, artists, on down to readers — has been it all before?*

MARK: Yes.

DWIGHT: *What do you do next? How do you top yourself?*

MARK: Well, there have been a lot of comics in the last 50 years, in the superhero genre, but I still don't think the genre has been totally mined out yet. Even with a character who has had as long a history as Captain America, there are still plenty of things to do. There are plenty of ways to keep that character vital, without throwing the baby out with the bath water, like my good close personal friend John Byrne did with his revamping of Superman. The real challenge is coming up with the new without throwing out the old. That's why the reaction I got to Cap being replaced surprised me with its vehemence. It was like I had *revised* the legend of Cap, not just written a weird new chapter. The response was amazing. I never got such hate mail in my life. The book never got this much mail in the six years I've been editing or writing it.

7:05 A.M.
I'VE NOT CAPTAIN AMERICA FOR SO LONG AS STEVE ROGERS DID...
BUT I KNOW THE JOB AND I'LL DO IT WELL.
LOCKED.
STILL WAITS, SOMEONE IS DESTINED TO USE IT...
8:10 A.M.
THE ARENA YOU'RE HEADING TO IS MY CRIMINAL SHRINE.
UH-OH.
CAPTAIN AMERICA'S BACK! CAPTAIN AMERICA'S BACK!
8:16 A.M.
8:17 A.M.
CAPTAIN AMERICA, GOOD TO SEE YOU'VE TAKEN UP THE MANTLE AGAIN.
I UNDERSTAND, STANDS, SIR.
I'VE NEED SEE, BECAUSE OF SOMETHING DID MARK GRUENWALD DO IN ISSUE 350?
I HAD A RUN-IN WITH A GUY CALLED ARROW ON CAMPUS, AND HE WAS DRESSED IN THE COSTUME OF A CAPTAIN AMERICA VILLAIN.
SIT DOWN, SOLDIER.
IT HAPPENED A FEW YEARS AGO.

CAP (Steve Rogers), having a hard day at the office.

DWIGHT: *That sounds like a case of, "Oh, yeah, CAPTAIN AMERICA, I remember when I read that as a kid. He was pretty good back then, I think I'll buy X-MEN. "And then suddenly they hear Steve Rogers isn't Cap any more and go,* "What! *Steve Rogers isn't Cap any more?"*

MARK: Yeah, that's exactly true. I'm getting letters that say, "I'm not a regular reader of the book, but if I were, I'd say how *dare* you replace Steve Rogers!" How dare I, I say? It at least got your attention. Why weren't you reading it before?

DWIGHT: *And the alternative is what, cancellation of the series?*

MARK: Maybe. I'm glad this has given it the shot in the arm.

DWIGHT: *Is Steve Rogers once again going to become Captain America?*

MARK: It all depends. I really don't have the termination point of the story line engraved in stone. I do know that I have issue #350 coming up and I'll have to do something big, but I have yet to explore all of the possibilities out of another man trying to fill Captain America's boots, or conversely Captain America trying to operate without the symbolic baggage which has been both a help and a hindrance to him in his career to date. I haven't milked that dry. But once I do,

got such hate mail in my life!!"

I'm sure the situation will change. If I sound evasive here, it's because I really don't know how it's going to come out. It'll be as big a surprise to me as to anybody else. I don't know if the Super-Patriot is going to succeed at being Cap. So far he hasn't.

In the storyline 10 years ago that **Steve Englehart** did, Cap became the Nomad, he was only Nomad for about five issues and he appeared in all of those issues. I did three issues in which Steve Rogers did not appear. Somebody wearing his costume did, but the title character — the reason why the book exists — did not appear. That was radical. So . . . where was my point? Oh, the hate mail. Now it's lightening up. In the fourth issue, I revealed where Steve Rogers was all of those months, and I got some better mail. "Well, at least you haven't abandoned him." And now I'm starting to get some mail saying, "Gee, it's more interesting to see Captain America foul up all of the time, rather than be the Captain America who was perfect and really had the job down. It's also interesting to see Steve Rogers having to cope with all of these problems he would never have had to cope with as Captain America."

DWIGHT: *Yeah, at one point he was even tossed in jail.*

MARK: Yeah, he gets thrown in jail the first time he helps out the police. They didn't *want* his help. He's nobody. Who is he?

DWIGHT: *Yeah. You have two fascinating challenges here. One, you essentially strip a guy of his identity, his whole* raison d'etre. *Two, you have someone walking in and trying to fill some pretty big shoes.*

MARK: The biggest in the Marvel Universe, I'd say. *(Laughter.)*

DWIGHT: *Either of those ideas would be a lot of work. How are you able to balance them both, do justice to both concepts?*

MARK: I tried every which way. I do some stories which are totally about Steve, some which are totally about the new Cap, and some in which I try to do a ping-pong job between the two. I even did one issue that had three separate stories, a Steve Rogers story, a new Cap story, and a tale of some of the most popular villains, the Serpent Society. That's never been done at Marvel, three complete self-contained stories in an issue. I'm trying all different ways, all leading toward the inevitable, which is new Cap meets old Cap.

DWIGHT: *Well, that's hard to resist.*

MARK: I can't resist it, but I hope to do it in a way that is surprising. We'll see. Yeah, so it's very difficult. The other thing that I have done to shake up the book is to change it from a single character book, with no supporting characters, into a group book — in fact a two-group book. There's the new Captain America and the new Bucky — remind me to tell you about the controversy of Bucky — and there's Captain America and his kooky quartet — *(Laughter.)* Nomad, D-Man, Falcon, and Nomad's sweetheart, Vagabond.

CAPTAIN, WE ARE THE ONLY AVENGERS LEFT! WE'VE GOT TO DO SOMETHING!
OUR SPECIAL PROJECT IS THE PERFECT TACTICAL SOLDIER! THE ULTIMATE WEAPON! WHO CARES WHAT THE PUBLIC THINKS?
WE WERE THE OTHER AVENGERS! WE WERE SUPPOSED TO BE A RUN AND GUN TEAM! NOTHING THAN COOPERATIVE...
THE PHANTOM EAGLE... WHO'S RUN AMOK! HE'S BEEN DISAVOWED! HE'S CONSIDERED NON-CONVICTED!
Marvelmania ANNUAL OF '68
RECENTLY THE PUBLIC OPINION WAS FLUCTUATING BETWEEN LOVE AND HATE FOR CAPTAIN AMERICA.
OVER THE NEXT FEW MONTHS, THE PUBLIC OPINION SWUNG BACK IN HIS FAVOR.
SO YOU'D CARE TO ACCOMPANY THE GOVERNMENT...
HMPH.
THOUGH YOU ARE NOW A FREE MAN, YOU ARE STILL UNDER THE JURISDICTION OF THE GOVERNMENT. YOU WILL REPORT TO THE OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY OF DEFENSE EVERY MONDAY AT 10 A.M. FOR DEBRIEFING.
YOU ARE DISMISSED.
MEANWHILE, PROJECT: REBIRTH, WAS PROCEEDING UPON THE BRAIN OF THE ORIGINAL SUPER-SOLDIER.
ACCORDING TO SPECIAL DOCUMENTS FOUND IN THE POSSESSION OF THE LATE ARNIM ZOLA, THE PROCESS OF FIGHTING AMERICA'S GREATEST HERO WAS ONLY THE SECOND STEP IN ZOLA'S MASTER PLAN.
AGAIN, YOU VEGETABLE, YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE A SUPER-SOLDIER! YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE ABLE TO HANDLE ANY SITUATION!
I'M SORRY, SIR. I'M NOT PROGRAMMED FOR EMOTIONAL COMMITMENTS.

DWIGHT: *Who sleeps through all the —*

MARK: So far she's been the most useless character ever introduced in the book, but she'll have her moments. We'll see why she got in there with Cap's three living ex-partners —

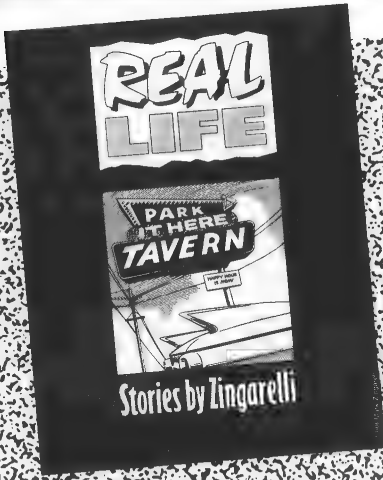
DWIGHT: *Who are helping Steve.*

MARK: Mm-hmm. Let's say you were going through some bad personal crisis, a divorce or bereavement or something. Your best friends would stand by you, help to see you through it. Well, if you happen to be a superhero, friends hanging around you would tend to get in on your adventures. That's just what happens to Cap. But all three of them will eventually have to get back to their normal lives; Falcon first because he's got more of a real life than Nomad and D-Man. What's good about having these three characters around all at the same time is they just have a totally different approach to being a partner and/or a friend to Cap, and by putting them together, the sparks begin to fly. They each know a different aspect of Cap, or are projecting onto him an aspect of *themselves* that's different. I find them an interesting crew to play around with. So I've turned it into a group book, thus making it all the more difficult

STORIES FROM

REAL LIFE

By Mark Zingarelli



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From FANTAGRAPHICS BOOKS

"I did not realize it was racist."

for me to tell simple straight-ahead adventures. But it's fun that way, really. Each month I approach doing the CAP plot saying. "Well, which Cap am I doing this month?"

DWIGHT: *You mentioned something about the controversy of a white Cap and a black Bucky?*

MARK: Yeah. It's like this, thanks to my background growing up in white middle class midwestern America, I did not have a lot of black people in my acquaintance. There were one or two in my high school, and I had one fairly good friend in college; and what this all leads to is I did not *realize* that the name "Bucky" could be construed as racist. Boy, this is gonna make me sound stupid. Apparently blacks are called "bucks"... I don't know this for a fact, I didn't look it up, but apparently it's got some sexual connotation like "stud" or something. I did not know that. I knew the character Buckwheat from the Little Rascals and I thought it was just an arbitrary name, you know, like Spanky. What does Spanky have to do with him being white? I don't know. Maybe I should have suspected since buckwheat, the actual grain, is kind of dark in color... that it was a racist nickname, even back at the time the Rascal shorts were being made.

So here I am blithely saying, "Oh, let's see —" Everybody wants Bucky back. I get several letters every month asking when Bucky's coming back. And I said, "Well, if the government's getting a new Captain America, maybe they'd want to get a new Bucky." I had previously introduced three Buckies as the friends and partners of the Super-Patriot, the Bold Urban Commandos, and rather than create someone new, I decided one of them would be *the* Bucky. There were two white guys and a black guy, and I said why not the black guy. He at least stood out in the group. Cap had a black partner before in the Falcon, but he's had three other white partners so I said it's time for another black one. Thus, Bucky was black. Now I'm getting a lot of bad mail, and deservedly so, for my ignorance. Not only is Bucky *not* a good name to be given to a black person, because of what "buck" means, and all, but also because of its associations — it's the name of a young white guy — a young dead white guy — a young dead *junior* white guy! All that stuff I now realize is not cool for a guy who is *bigger* than Captain America, who is equally as strong and just as straight ahead as he is.

So, Bucky is soon going to change his name. In CAP #341, he gets a new name,

IS THIS LEADING TO WHAT I THINK THIS LEADING TO?
AHH! THE GUARD'S BEEN DISMISSED AND I'M ARRESTED BY THE SUPER-PATRIOT GOVERNMENT.
YOU DON'T REMEMBER ON YOUR OWN, BUCKY, BUT I'VE BEEN TELLING YOUR STORY AS WELL.
SINCE THE VERY BEGINNING, CAPTAIN AMERICA'S ENEMIES HAVE USED YOUR MEMORY AGAINST YOU.
YOU DISAPPEARED ON THE EVE OF WORLD WAR II, PRESUMED DEAD AND DISCHONORABLY FROM THE ARMY.
BUT YOU WERE NOT DISCHARGED, YOU WERE A WAR HERO WHO VOLUNTEERED FOR A SUICIDE STRIKE!
THE BOTTOM LINE IS, BUCKY, YOU'RE GOING TO WORK FOR US. YOU'RE GOING TO DO WHAT I TELL YOU TO DO. YOUR COUNTRY!
AH, SINCE MY OWN COUNTRY IS SO BENT ON PLACING ITS OWN INTERESTS ABOVE THE WELL-BEING OF ITS CITIZENS, AND SINCE I'VE ALREADY BEEN DISHONORED WITH—
YOU FAIL TO COME AS ORDERED, BUCKY, AND I'LL SEND AN ARMY OF CAPTAIN AMERICAS AFTER YOU!
THE COMMISSION HAS BEEN ACCUSED OF ACCEPTING BRIBES, OF CORRUPTION, OF SCIENTIFIC MALFEASANCE, AND I CAN ONLY ASSUME THAT THEY'RE ON TARGET!
NOW...AFTER ALL THESE YEARS, ARE YOU JUST NOW GETTING AROUND TO ASKING ME?
BUT I'VE BEEN ACTING AUTHORITATIVELY FOR SOMEONE WHO DOESN'T ACCEPT YOUR TREASON!
WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?
YOUR SERVICE RECORD, SIR! YOU'RE AMERICA'S SUPER-PATRIOT! YOU'RE ONE OF THE PEOPLE WHO DECIDED WHAT'S GOOD FOR THIS COUNTRY!
WELL, I'M GOING TO BE IN A POSITION TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT!
I'M GOING TO DO WHAT I'M ASSIGNED TO DO!
WILL DO SO, YOU CRITICAL POSITION AS AMERICA'S SUPER-SOLDIER, AND ARE ALL THE MORE DISGUSTED BY THE ASSIGNED BY THIS OFFICE!

and we make a big deal about it. I have someone, a black security guard, come up to him and say "Do you realize what an *insult* it is, you being called Bucky?" And he says, "No, I didn't. All I know is that this is the best job I ever had — they're giving me a nice education and the salary and benefits are good." And then the guard explains the whole thing I just mentioned, and Bucky says, "Yeah, you're right — I'd better talk to the feds about that."

So, they come up with a new image for him. His new code name will be Battle Star, and he won't look like a junior partner anymore. He'll premiere his new costume and identity at the same press conference in which the new Captain America reveals to the public he's not the original

The search for a good name for a partner to Cap is a whole half-hour unto itself. *(Laughter.)* We came up with *every* single name which was vaguely patriotic, vaguely military, and yet stood on its own, because some day these guys may split up. So, it's Captain America and Battle Star. It sounds fine, it trips off the tongue. So, that's the bad mail I got on Bucky. I got bad mail on Cap, bad mail on Bucky, but all the while the sales have increased, and that's what I'm paid to do, write it and make it sell. And, not only did I get criticism for getting rid of Steve, not only did I get criticism for making Bucky black, I got criticism for putting in a *Southerner* as Captain America. So, let's hear from that contingent of the country — especially since that's where this

"I'm getting people complaining that

magazine's publisher lives. *(Laughter.)*

DWIGHT: *Well, why is the new Captain America from the South?*

MARK: I designed John Walker, the new Super-Patriot, as part of my ongoing attempt to make Captain America's villains specific to Captain America. Captain America is not a generic hero. Not that *any* Marvel heroes are generic, but let's just say that Spider-Man does not represent spiders. Spider-Man's a guy who happens to have spider powers. He can fight anybody. Captain America is different, he *represents* something very specific, and I don't feel that he can fight just any old person that Spider-Man can. A Captain America story should always have this symbolic level or he becomes generic. Captain America's best villain has always been Red Skull. Why? Because he is the flip side of the ideological coin that Captain America is on, tyranny versus freedom. After a while, though, the Red Skull was overplayed. You know, every six months we'd announce, "You'll never guess who's behind the scenes!" *(Goofy voice.)* "Duh, is it da Red Skull?" Yessirree! It's the Red Skull! Trotting him out was getting a bit tiresome, so under my editorship, scripter **Marc DeMatteis** got rid of the Red Skull for what seems to be permanent — but you know comics. *(Laughter.)*

But other than the Skull, Cap's not had such a great rogues' gallery. Most of his foes have not had the symbolism that the Red Skull had, and thus they were not half as good a Cap foe. Think of all of the main Captain America villains: Baron Zemo, Modok, Batroc, Madame Hydra or the Viper... You start running out really quick. So, one of the first things I wanted to do was to try to think of opponents for Captain America that *embodied* something, like the Red Skull. So, what should they embody? Something about America or the world political situation. So other than Armadillo — who is just a silly monster I wanted to throw in as kind of a joke on the old Marvel armadillo thing in the letters page — virtually every character that I've introduced or that I've reintroduced *has* had this symbolic aspect to their nature. That's not to say that I take concepts and put a costume on them and turn them into characters. But that's my starting point: What is the opposite of Captain America? What sorts of things would *only* Captain America be concerned about?

I started with the opposite of patriotism, *anti-patriotism*, and came up with the Flag-Smasher, who was totally against the concept of countries and nationalism. And, I just went on from there as far as trying

I depict all Southerners as jerks."

to figure out parts of American culture and the world political situation of today, and finding a way to embody them. I took censorship and repression and I created the Watchdog group. I took drug running and I created the Slug, the most disgusting villain I could think of. (At the time, I thought a 1200 pound man was a bit farfetched, but I've since read about such a guy in *People.*) To represent the military, I created G.I. Max as their new super soldier. Madcap represents purposelessness, the disaffected youth of today who thinks, "What's the reason for doing anything?" The ultimate dropout generation. To deal with the health and fitness craze, I made the Power Broker. Nuclear paranoia -- I invented the Overrider, whose son was suffering from nuclear psychosis and so he wanted to eliminate all nukes. Vigilantism with Scourge. And this one will sound really contrived, but the idea behind the Serpent Society — who probably look like a bunch of standard villains — trade unions. *(Laughter.)* And wait until this union merges with another one coming up later this year, it'll be AFL-CIO all over.

I made this giant list of aspects of American life today, and when I had to go to the old "idea-well" for a story, I'd take out that list and see what I hadn't hit yet and say, "Well, how can I deal with this aspect of American life by having a character embody this?" It's right up Captain America's alley, and some people have noticed this and have said, *(Goofy voice.)* "Oh, it's so campy, fighting Flag-Smasher an' alla dese guys." The stories, anyone can judge whether they're corny or campy or don't work for them, but to me, symbolic conflict is the essence of Cap. He *has* to be involved in the concerns of America and the greater world today in a way that an Iron Man or a Spider-Man does not have to. I'm not trying to do camp villains — I'm trying to stay in the tradition of the Red Skull If the Red Skull is camp to you because he's super-arch-Nazi, well, I'm sorry. This is comic books, folks. *(Laughter.)* All this is leading to Super-Patriot — really. I invented Super-Patriot because I realized that with Captain America being a patriot and being the hero of the strip, and being good and all, that the book was in essence saying patriotism is great, all the time, no matter how you slice it. But there are *bad* aspects to patriotism, too, so I wanted to come up with a character who...

DWIGHT: *Carries patriotism to the extreme?*

MARK: Right. Someone who was the dark side of the American dream, who embodied patriotism in a way that Captain America didn't — a patriotic *villain.* Basically, I just wanted to do the opposite of Steve Rogers. Okay, Steve Rogers is a poor northern urban boy. So I'll make a guy from rural middle class south. Cap is now old, so this guy'll be a real young up-and-comer. Cap has lofty ideals, so I'll make Super-Patriot be more realistic and more pragmatic. So, I put together his background and character traits by playing the opposite game.

DWIGHT: *Well, why are people writing in to complain about this?*

MARK: I'm getting people complaining that I depict all Southerners as jerks. *(Laughter.)* Now, it's true that the Watchdog group, who stood for the concept of censorship and repression, were based down south in Super-Patriot's hometown. That was my way to make it up close and personal to him, to make it a real difficult fight for him. And — I hate to have to tell anyone but — it's true, a lot of censorship activities do happen down south. I saw a program on PBS last night about the Constitution —

DWIGHT: *Yeah, I saw that, too.*

MARK: Yeah. Book burnings don't tend to take place as often up north. I'm going to do a Watchdog story in the future which takes place up north, but for the sake of Super-Patriot's baptism of fire as the new Cap, I had to do the Watchdogs where he was from. Super-Patriot started out acting like a jerk, but I now see him as a guy trying to do a tough job. Ultimately, I think, people will accept him as a hero. Not ever as good a hero as Steve Rogers — I mean nobody's *that* good except Steve — but he's slouching towards herodom. I hope to eventually beat the rap of portraying all Southerners as bad role models.

DWIGHT: *The sort of man is Steve Rogers going to become after all of this?*

MARK: I really don't know. I know what kind of man he is now, and I know that he is going to be affected by the circumstances. There's a major difference between now and the previous period, in which he was out of uniform for any length of time, is the Watergate/Nomad/Secret Empire story line **Steve Englehart** did. This was the first time it was a real shock to his ideals that someone in high office would betray that office so much. It made him voluntarily want to leave his role as Captain America. This time what's happened is not such a shock to his ideals — he certainly knows what bureaucracy is, he's lived with it for years. Quitting was purely of his own volition last time, it wasn't this time. It's the difference between quitting a job and being fired from it. He was put into circumstances where he was, in essence, fired for insubordination.

DWIGHT: *It was either hand in your resignation or you're fired.*

MARK: Do it our way, or else. What he learned from the original Nomad/Watergate thing is...he's not disillusioned. After Watergate, he didn't know *what* to do with his life. This time he did know — he would still go on serving the country as best he could, he just needed a few months off in order to figure out how to do that, what tack to take.

"The New Universe missed the point of

WE TOURED THE COUNTRY HELD FANTASTIC RALLIES, BIG CRAWDADDY STUFF, AND SOMEHOW THINGS LIKE THAT... TWIN WINNEBAGO CAME ALONG.
FOR A SIMPLE GUY, WHO'D NEVER BEEN OUTSIDE NEW JERSEY, YOU'RE A REAL YOU, MAVAN. HAV YOU WANTED TO KNOW?
MM-HMM. LOOKS LIKE A REPLICA OF CAPTAIN AMERICA'S SHIELD.
IT'S AUTHENTIC. THE MAN WHO ORIGINALLY CARRIED CAPTAIN AMERICA'S SHIELD DIED RECENTLY. I ASKED TO BORROW HIS COUNTRY FOR AN EVENING. ONCE AGAIN, HE GRANTED ME THE STUFF I NEED. HIS SHIELD AND UNIFORM.
HE --- PASSED AWAY? NOW WHY WOULD ANYONE WHO SAVE HE LOVES HIS COUNTRY DO A THING LIKE THAT?
THAT'S UNBELIEVABLE! HE WALKED, WHAT'S HAPPENED TO THE CAPTAIN AMERICA MYSTIQUE?
HE'S DISCREDITING YOU.
WHAT'S HE DO IT?
HA-HA, IF THIS DOESN'T BEAT ALL--!
WHAT... IS SO FUNNY?
WELL, I'VE BEEN IN ON THE CAPTAIN'S DIRTY LITTLE SECRET FOR YEARS. I'VE BEEN DELUGED TO PUBLICLY ABOLISH THIS. I DIDN'T THINK HE WAS GETTING QUITE SO MUCH PUBLICITY OUT OF IT.
ARE YOU INTERESTED IN MY PROPOSAL, MR. WALKER?
WELL, AS I SAID, A TRUE PATRIOT HEARS HIS COUNTRY'S CALL. NO MATTER WHAT.
BUT, WITH ALL THE TIME AND EFFORT I INVESTED IN BECOMING CAPTAIN AMERICA, IT WOULD BE SATISFYING WITH A NAME TO BE ASSOCIATED WITH IT. I'D BE STUNNED TO GIVE IT UP.
I COULDN'T JUST DO THE JOB WITHOUT CHANGING MY NAME AND COSTUME...?
NO, CAPTAIN AMERICA IS A TRADITION THAT GOES BACK DECADES. WE WANT TO PRESERVE IT!
WELL?
HMMM.

Never once did he waver in his commitment to the ideals of the country, he was just trying to figure out the particulars. So, I gave him a three-month Marvel-time break while he did all that, and then he came back as the Captain. So, what he's going to ultimately learn from all this? I don't know, but he's not as young and impressionable and disillusionable as he was during the Watergate affair. So, to answer your question — I don't know. *(Laughter.)*

DWIGHT: *Well, let's move over to another one where "I don't know" will probably pop up. What's happening in the New Universe?*

MARK: Right. Can I say a few words about the old New Universe?

DWIGHT: *Oh, certainly. (Laughter.)*

MARK: Some people were surprised that I got in on it, because I'm considered such an arch-Marvelite, you know, being the originator and one of the chief writers of the MARVEL UNIVERSE HANDBOOK and all. Well, being so steeped in Marvel history and continuity and everything made me realize that although there are a lot of benefits to writing stories in such a *terrific* fictional framework as the Marvel Universe – I mean you've got all of this Marvel back history to draw upon and to reweave into an interesting tapestry — it was also limiting. There were certain things you couldn't do. As an example, if you invent someone who gets the power of flight, so what? Who *can't* fly these days? In the Marvel Universe there have been costumed heroes at least since World War One, thanks to **Roy Thomas**, so when a new superhero comes along, it's just no big deal.

And then there's the whole hidden history of the Marvel Universe, in which all of these secret civilizations, other dimensions, and alien races exist — all of these other things which you would have *thought* would make a lot of difference in the world — yet haven't. DALLAS is on TV, New York looks the same, **Ronald Reagan** is president — what you have is a world with *giant* differences from our own that made no difference. As much as I love the Marvel Universe, after awhile I said, "Maybe it would be refreshing to have a virgin universe to play with." So when I heard about the New Universe, I signed up (to **Jim Shooter's** surprise) and eventually developed what became D.P.7. The original title was MISSING PERSONS, and then it became M.P.7 (MISSING PARANORMALS), and then **John Morelli** (co-creator of SPIT-FIRE) thought of D.P. 7 (DISPLACED PARANORMALS). I wanted the book to have a real punk — new wave —name. So, that's why I wanted in on the New Universe. I had really only a character or two as a concept at the start.

DWIGHT: *Why didn't the old New Universe work out? There are major revamps in the works, I've read.*

MARK: The problem with the old New Universe — other than its overkill hype — is we didn't use realism as well as we could have. By that, I mean the New U's departure point being our real world. There was a big misunderstanding among all of the creators, myself included, that we should *keep* the New U the world outside your window — that it should *never* change too much, or else we'd lose reader identification or something. We missed the point of having a virgin universe, uncluttered by known super-beings, aliens, other dimensions, hidden civilizations, and all that. The point is enabling the reader to experience the *first time* the weird stuff starts happening — and, more importantly, letting the weird stuff actually affect the status quo of the world. Super heroes would have a profound effect on the world, but we've never really pursued those differences.

Well, what with recent changes in management and rethinking the New Universe — what made us rethink it, of course, was (should I say it?) the abysmal sales *(Laughter.)* — we decided that now we can cut loose and move away from staying the world outside your window. We don't have to have DALLAS on television. We don't have to have New York look the same. We don't have to have **Ronald Reagan** as president. Those things might not remain the same once

having a virgin universe, uncluttered."

paranormals start having an impact on world affairs. The changes to reality will start snowballing rapidly. As THE PITT reveals, all bets are off. The challenge to us now is trying to make things wilder than not only the Marvel Universe but wilder than what's been seen in comics before — and believe me, *a lot* of things have been done in comics before. The Pitt and the Star Brand controversy — never before has one human being misused his power quite as badly as Ken Connell does in the creation of the Pitt — it is just the beginning. Now the New U's a real exciting universe to play in, because you can do anything as long as it logically follows from events, taking July '86 of the real world as a starting point.

DWIGHT: *Which happened first, getting John Byrne or the idea of THE PITT?*

MARK: John Byrne first. The political climate was such that he wanted to come back to Marvel, and he'd heard STAR **BRAND** was open, and that book interested him. **Howard Mackie** had just become the editor, and Howard and John like each other for some reason and he signed up for it. Howard told him that our directive now — at that point we knew that half of the line was going to be canceled and the other was hanging on by its toenails — the directive was to do big, new exciting things, all bets were off. What do we have to lose, why hold back? So there was a meeting, **John Byrne** came into the office. We were talking about what to do, and Howard, John and I were there saying, "We've got to do something spectacular, what can it be?" I don't know whose idea it was. One person said something and it went through us all. It all made immediate sense and we *realized* that this was the thing that was going to suddenly show that all bets were off in the New Universe. Having a gaping hole 50 miles across that goes 25 miles straight down into the earth's magma layer, and all that hot lava is going to go somewhere — having a Pitt instead of a city is one *major* difference.

And that's just the beginning. The hole is so big that it is going to affect the tectonic plates as well as the atmosphere, so . . . I don't want to say what effects it would have on the atmosphere, but you could probably look it up in the scientific books. Mount St. Helens put a whole lot of volcanic ash into the atmosphere, and that was just one small volcano. This is going to be the world's largest volcano. It's going to have worldwide meteorological consequences. Think of the political consequences of the destruction of one of America's top 20 industrial

MAYAN, IF UNCLE SAM WANTED ME TO BE ANCIENT MAYAN, I'D DO IT.
I'M THAT KIND OF AMERICAN. THE KIND YOU CAN COUNT ON. WHEN DO I START?
YOU'LL HAVE TO RUN A BRAINWORKING EXERCISE ON YOU FIRST, SHE WALKS IN. LET ME SEE WHAT YOU CAN BE READY...
HEY, CAPTAIN AMERICA! I DON'T BELIEVE WHAT YOU WILL BECOME!
YOU— CAPTAIN AMERICA—!?!
HEY! FIGHTING MY BACKGROUND CHECKS OUT— WHICH I WISH IT WILL...
THERE'S GOTTA BE A CATCH. WHAT'S IT. THE ORIGINAL CAPTAIN AMERICA DIDN'T HAVE NERVE GAS TO DO SOMETHING LIKE THIS. I'D RATHER DIE FOR HIM.
OR MAYBE WHAT S'HE TOLD HIM FINALLY SUNK IN. HE'S A HERO.
I SAY WE WAIT TO HEAR ALL THESE FRIENDS THEN DEVISE A PLAN OF OUR OWN.
NO CAN DO, BTHAN. I ALREADY AGREED TO IT.
YOU!... ANYCROFT!
SORRY, SCOTT. I DON'T AGREE WITH THAT.
YOU PROBABLY MADE A SMART MOVE THERE, BTHAN. WHAT'S THE PLAN? WHAT WILL THEIR ROLE BE? HOW DO YOU SELL THEM ON YOU—THEM HITTING WITH YOUR FRIENDS?
ALL RIGHT. THEN WHAT WE DO IS... BLOCKADE THE BUILDING!

population centers. There are going to be a lot of political consequences that will make a global difference. Six months after THE PITT, the world is going to be on the brink of something that has not been seen in comics before.

GREG: And Ken Connell's ass is going to be grass.

MARK: Yeah, he's the instigator, but I don't know at what point, if at all, the world is ever going to know exactly what happened. Do we really know whose fault it was at Chernobyl? They'll give us a good story, "The guy left his Pepsi . . . yeah, his Pepsi, it spilled into the console and we had a meltdown." We don't know. It may not come out. But the consequences certainly will be known, and they will be *big*! So, there are going to be major political ramifications which are going to affect every book. The good thing about the new stripped down four-book New Universe is this very tight continuity. It's almost going to be like an event of the month club. THE PITT is going to affect all of the books this month, then **Reagan**'s response to THE PITT will affect them next month. So, it's going to be quite exciting as we start veering into an alternate time line in real time.

There have been alternate time lines in comics before. WATCHMEN is the most recent great one. But, whenever it's been done in comics before, the time line has been set in the future or some parallel dimension. I did it with SQUADRON SUPREME and its separate Earth, KILLRAVEN did it with a future of 2019 after the Martians had landed. But never before have we seen what has led up to

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9. Favorite Comic Book .....

10. Favorite Limited Comic-Book Series .....

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"I have no idea what I'm doing."

an alternate world in real time. We did not see the intervening years in THE WATCHMEN in which all of the set-up to the story occurred. We had to learn about it after the fact. With the New Universe, we're going to get the set-up of an alternate time line in real time. As a result, the time line is going to be a little bit more organic, less pre-ordained. We don't have an end point. We don't *know* what's going to happen. In WATCHMEN, **Alan Moore** knew what story he wanted to tell, and so he set up the past in order to get to the story he wanted to tell in the present. We don't know where we're going with the New U. Does anybody? We just know that we want to proceed like the domino theory, one thing affects the next thing, it causes bigger and bigger ripples. We're certainly not talking about the world outside your window anymore. I don't really know what my characters are going to do next month, how they're going to react to universe-wide changes, how developments will affect them. That's real exciting.

DWIGHT: *It is kind of a paradox, Mr. Marvel Universe dealing with CAPTAIN AMERICA and having that plotted out four months in advance and at the same time you're —*

MARK: Doing D.P.7, and I have no idea what I'm doing from one month to the next. A great thing about doing Captain America, Marvel's primo character in my opinion, and D.P.7 — which is one of my own puttering creations — is the contrast. Captain America, meaning Steve Rogers, doesn't make mistakes. He is a consummate hero. He is as close to human perfection as is possible. I think that was another reason why his viability was hurt with the younger market. This guy didn't make mistakes, he made it look *easy*. They want people that have to struggle a little bit more and who can foul up like them. That's why Spider-Man is so popular, he has the capacity to be just like the reader might be and foul up in a big way. Well, with the New Universe I have the foul-up factor all sewn up. *None* of my guys are perfect, and none of them have the ideal attributes that Captain America has, and most heroes of the Marvel Universe have to a lesser extent. I've got characters with worse hang-ups than a Marvel person can have, and it permeates the very substance of their abilities. The main thing about the D.P.7 is they're not heroes. They are heroes in the sense of being protagonists, but they don't consider themselves world-beating heroes, or crime-fighters — they never have and never will.

DWIGHT: *Well, one thing that John*

"I gave the Blur an eating problem."

Byrne will do, which helped out in context for me a lot of what the New Universe is, was taking the idea of super heroes and instead of putting it on sort of a cosmic scale, which is Marvel Universe, he put it on a more human scale.

MARK: Yeah. The powers of most all of the characters in D.P.7 have been done before. There are not a lot of new superhuman powers to come up with. However, I've tried to be relentlessly realistic in my approach to those powers. For example, take super-strength — with the Hulk, as great a character as he is, you see this three-panel transformation sequence between puny Bruce Banner and the 900 pound Hulk; you get him writhing a little bit and in three panels it's done, he's added on 750 pounds of muscles from nowhere, he's become green, he's become twice as tall, and the most he says is "Argh!"

DWIGHT: *He's gray now.*

MARK: Yeah, he's gray now. *(Laughter.)* If my body put on that kind of weight, those kind of muscles, that quickly, I don't think it would feel good. And it wouldn't happen in three panels. So, I came up with my Dave Landers Mastodon character in which every muscle that came in was extremely painful, he was very, very sick while it was happening, it took weeks to occur and he had to eat voraciously to put on all the added weight. I read in some science magazine about this treatment where they attach two electrodes to your abdomen and send an electrical current through you so it causes a contraction of the muscles in such a way that it actually exercises them without you exercising. A minute of this is the equivalent of doing 500 sit-ups. When you walk away from this contraption your body feels like it just did 500 sit-ups in a minute. That must hurt! It must be extremely painful! Imagine that happening body wide, and that's how it went with Dave Landers. So, my approach to super-strength is you put on the mass by eating, and that your bones stretching and your muscle tissue expanding does not feel good.

I approach all of the D.P.'s powers that way, as much as I can. Jeff Walters, the Blur, with super-speed — you know, it always bothered me that these super-speedsters did not seem to be eating as much as I know athletes eat in order to be able to accomplish their great feats. So, I gave him an eating problem, and that has since become the norm for super-speedsters. He's also going to talk fast, unintelligibly. And if he doesn't get the food, he's going to collapse. He has so much energy that he can't even stand still. I thought these were real neat innovations to a real neat power to have, which is being so fast you can walk across the street at any time and never get hit by a car. *(Laughter.)*

I also approached their personalities by taking a step toward greater realism. I mean it would take a hell of a lot for *me* to decide to put on a costume and fight crime. It would take a *whole* lot. You blow away my family like in DEATH WISH and that might make me go off my rocker and want to hurt people, but would that make me want to put on a costume? No. You pay me a million dollars to wear a costume in public and that would motivate me to put on a costume. But would you get me to fight crime in a costume? No. So, one of my main problems with the D.P.7 in the early issues was I just didn't have any reason for them to do anything heroic. I just couldn't contrive a situation that would warrant these normal people with these paranormal powers to want to do something heroic. This is contrary to the comic book tradition, in which once a character gets through his origin story, he knows the right thing to try to do, with his great power.

DWIGHT: *Well, that's what one of the big challenges with the New Universe would seem to be, since it was a radically different premise to . . . to expose fans to a different way of storytelling? For instance, with a small publisher, such as Eclipse or Renegade, they may come up with a radically different title. One almost expects it* from *them, but for Marvel to turn around and say we're going to do something radically different, Marvel's banked an awful lot on something that fans were not expecting to get from them.*

MARK: Yeah, and it's a shame it got off

"My concept is to have no fixed concept."

to such an inauspicious start. I think that deep down there was a great idea. Just as Spider-Man was ten degrees more realistic than Superman, as he had been portrayed up to the point of Spider-Man's debut, you *still* had a guy who was dressing up in a funny costume and fighting crime for whatever reasons. Spider-Man was supposed to be the *next* step towards realism the readers could relate to — you get powers and you don't quite decide to fight crime at first. The New U books were supposed to be ten degrees more realistic than Spider-Man. I thought the early STAR BRANDS were *brilliant* in realizing this potential. **Jim Shooter** depicted this basically unlikeable guy, coping with great power, and how he finally realizes that he's got to do something good with it. I was trying to do much the same in D.P.7. In the first twelve issues, the group does only *one good deed*, they help a few people off a bus — and that's the extent of their heroism.

My whole intention with D.P.7 was to do a group book that was not like any group book that I've ever read, and I've read a lot since group books have always been my favorite comics to read. I said, "There must be *something* that can still be done with a bunch of super-powered guys hanging around." I think I've found it, but unfortunately I may have found it to an extent that is so far away from what you might expect of a super-group, that you don't get what you read group books for. I said, "Alright, most super-groups get together and fight crime, these guys won't." Most heroes in groups are about the same age, so I put in a 15-year-old and a 66-year-old. Most groups have a headquarters. They don't; they ride around. Most groups have an unlimited operational budget; they'll be broke. So, I've got it in my notes somewhere, I made an analysis of 13 or 14 superhero groups, all the ones that I could think of, and how they compared in terms of membership, origin, purpose, budget, procedures — all of these things. I then decided I would do none of those. As a result, I got a group book that I certainly found interesting, and it was and is the best or the second best seller in the New Universe line.

But, if you were expecting super-group pyrotechnics in D.P.7, your expectations were not met. I refused to give the D.P.'s an easy premise. The premise of the first twelve issues was paranormals as fugitives, and that evolved in issue #13 to paranormals as a therapy group. That's never been done in comics before, and probably for good reason! Hero groups are generally based on the idea of outcasts, on the idea of family, on the idea of adventurers, on the idea of students at school. No one ever thought of a super-group as a psychotherapy group talking out their problems. That's what it's been since issue #13, and *that* premise changes radically with issue #18, and changes further still with issue #21. So, my concept of D.P.7 is to have no fixed concept. In any other Marvel book, the premise remains much the same. With the FANTASTIC FOUR, you may get a few replacement characters, but basically the book's concept of a family of adventurers remains.

DWIGHT: *So with D.P.7 you tried to step out of that a bit, and this radical tack has . . . what, confused the readers?*

MARK: We really gave them what they didn't expect from a Marvel book. But the main problem with D.P.7 has been it's been tarred by the same brush as the rest of the New U line, which suffered from musical creative teams and ill-defined concepts. Oh, yes — let me say that D.P.7 would not have been any fun — or half as good — without my artist, **Paul Ryan**.

DWIGHT: *He did the cover for this COMICS INTERVIEW.*

MARK: Let's hear it for Paul. He manages to draw very specific looking characters who are easy to tell apart, even though they don't have regular identifiable costumes. If their faces don't look the same from panel to panel, you're not going to be able to tell who's who. And he captures all of these great nuances of expression. He's really made me able to do a character-intensive book. He's also the only guy who's done every single issue of a New Universe book. We're the only consistent team, and I hope we stay together as long as it lives. He's also a fountainhead of ideas on where to take all of the various characters, and the book wouldn't be where it is without him — you can supply your own opinion on where you think it is. *(Laughter.)* He's been great. He's a real *thinking* artist, and he makes it a pleasure to script. He makes my job easy.

Let me also mention **Kieron Dwyer**, my new artist on CAP. The guy is really a find — improving wildly with each issue. He is going to be a major talent in the industry in years to come. For my money, the book has never looked better while I've been writing it. Kieron's also a good idea man — he came up with the name "Battle Star" for the new Bucky.

EXACTLY!
"WELL, THAT'S WHERE IT STARTED, I GUESS.
"I MADE A COSTUME F'KENNY, AN' ME AN' MYRON- WITHOUT KENNY KNOWIN' WE WAS IN ON IT T'GETHER - ME AN' MYRON CONVINCED HIM T'GO PUBLIC.
"THAT'S WHEN TH' WORLD FOUND OUT ABOUT TH' STAR BAND.

"DeFalco does not seem to have as

DWIGHT: *Well, let's move over to something that must have its difficult moments, and that is your new position as Executive Editor of Marvel Comics.*

MARK: Right. I've been on the job officially since September 1, although I've been doing it functionally since May. My main problem with it right now is because I'm still the regular editor on the AVENGERS line, I'm holding down two jobs. So, I'm not totally devoting myself to just my executive responsibilities. Actually, I have no idea what I'm doing yet. *(Laughter.)* I had to make a *list* to remind me of what I should be doing. (Reads it.) I serve as Editor-in-Chief when **Tom DeFalco**, Editor-in-Chief, is absent. I work with editors on project developments —*if* they want me involved. I coordinate crossovers involving more than two editors. If it's only two they can talk to one another. If it's more than that, it becomes an administrative nightmare. I arbitrate on questions of proprietorship of characters, like if two editors were to claim exclusive dibs on the Sub-Mariner. I'm writing most of the Bullpen Pages these days, although Tom still does some of them. I consult with the Editor-in-Chief on free-lancer rates and inquiries about assignments. I conduct whatever meetings the Editor-in-Chief doesn't want to, and that's usually the Assistant Editors Weekly Workshop. That's what I do so far.

DWIGHT: *What is the Assistant Editors Weekly Workshop?*

MARK: Well, there's no school where you can learn the art of being an editor, and there's no way you can learn what it takes to be a comic-book editor just by reading comics, so what Tom set up was a weekly session where we meet with all the assistants and talk about the craft of the medium — no offense, Dave — and storytelling techniques, and any and all questions pertaining to what it takes to edit a comic book. We get all 1800 assistant editors up in one room, and we talk theory and practice. We'll discuss comic-book covers and try to determine what a good cover is. We're trying to get our people on the assistant level in sync with the basic *Marvel manifesto!* Just kidding, we have no Marvel manifesto, but we do have a Marvel approach to doing comics, which I feel is a very exciting and valid approach. It's what's made Marvel the #1 comics company, so there can't be anything too wrong with it.

DWIGHT: *Well, Greg, you have been listening to all this, do you have anything you'd like to add, since you're an assistant editor?*

GREG: On the assistant editors meetings? Well, Mark takes over and tells lots of jokes. *(Laughter.)*

MARK: Yeah, I try to keep it light.

GREG: He tells most of the jokes. He takes criticism on his own books a lot of times. We end up crucifying the books Mark edits —

MARK: Or writes.

GREG: The covers he designs. But he doesn't get defensive about it.

MARK: I've always taken criticism well, which is good 'cause I get a lot of it!

GREG: Today we were criticizing something about a CAPTAIN AMERICA cover and about the story in that issue, and he flipped open his notebook and started taking down notes. I don't know, maybe he was writing down everyone's name. *(Laughter.)*

MARK: I was taking attendance. *(Laughter.)* This workshop is something I would have paid my eyeteeth for when I first got in. I didn't know what I was doing — some say I still don't know, in fact I say that. You just *can't* learn the basic craft of the medium off the streets. You

strong a personal vision as Shooter. . ."

can learn only so much from reading comics before you have to learn by doing, and this just gives us a chance to talk about it. I think we really needed it, what with the rapid turnaround we now have in our editorial staff. *(Old man voice.)* "In my day, sonny, you were an assistant for five years before you got a shot at being an editor." Now sometimes people can go from selling pencils on the street to being a full editor in two years. I had a nice long apprenticeship of four or five years. I got to learn at the feet of *many* masters, because my original job here was assistant editor slash liaison with all of Marvel's writer-editors at the time — **Marv Wolfman, Steve Gerber, Roy Thomas, Archie Goodwin,** and **Jim Shooter.** I got to learn at their feet as they were stepping on me — just kidding. So I had a great, well rounded education, that was only furthered when I did one-year assistant stints with **Denny O'Neil** and **Tom DeFalco.** All of these poor schmucks — no offense — who are now assistant editors have usually only one or two persons that they're working with before they're pushed out of the nest to be a full editor. They're not getting as well rounded an experience as I had. So these meetings are one way to let them benefit from at least Tom's and my experience, as well as that of all of their peers, and to enable them to get a collective idea of what we're doing and how we're doing it and how to make it better.

DWIGHT: *How would you describe Marvel Comics, the post-Shooter period, the Tom DeFalco era?*

MARK: Everyone has his own approach to Editor-in-Chiefing. Tom's is different from Jim's. Tom does not seem to have as strong a personal vision for Marvel, and as a result he's more open to other people's visions. It remains to be seen if that's good or bad. Marvel really went places under a single vision for ten years. Some people may not like the places it went, but it certainly helped having one unified thrust as opposed to a bunch of full shots in different directions, and writer-editors who were sniping at one another and writers doing things in their own pocket universes. Tom's main directive is to put the *hoopla* back into Marvel Comics and do **Stan Lee** types of stories. Tom says, "Let's do Stan Lee comics because that's what Marvel was founded upon, had its earliest successes upon, and that's what we do *better* than anybody else!" I find that back-to-basics approach refreshing. After all, that's why I wanted to read Marvels.

DWIGHT: *DC has been coming out with a whole series of special format books and projects. What's the future shaping up for Marvel in that respect?*

MARK: We'll probably *copy* every one of their formats — I didn't say that! *(Laughter.)* DC has been *great* at finding new formats and packages that the public wants to see. I've read that on the direct market they've really closed up the gap between themselves and Marvel in how much money they made last year, thanks to some of their big gun heavy sellers. If you have one book at 75 cents and one at $7.50, you have to sell 99 fewer $7.50 books in order to make the same amount, you know. Marvel is still way in the lead as far as single copy sales on what we call the plain vanilla comic, but DC has taken the lead with these prestige type limited projects. More power to them. I think Marvel is going to do some more upscale books — but we're not ever going to abandon our commitment to produce the mainstream kind of comics that people want to buy — the plain vanilla comic.

We will be doing some more experimentation. **THE PITT** is one of our first ventures into those squarebound books that aren't quite graphic novels and aren't quite comics, and we've got plans for at least two sequels to THE PITT. The next one is going to be called THE DRAFT, and the one after that I think will be called WORLD WAR THREE, but don't quote me. These are special event items that exist unto themselves, but they kind of tell a serial story, so they should be interesting. I hope we come up with a few formats of our own that DC hasn't tried first, but it's not who does it first, it's who does it best!

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He was good,
he was fast
and he lived next door.
A perfect set up for an art director
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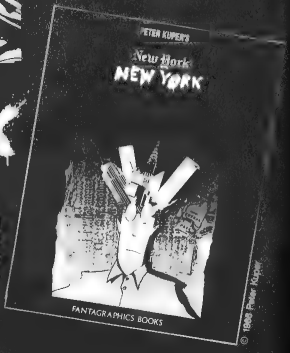

"I splattered ink on a Barry Windsor-Smith page once, without the editors knowing."

BILL OAKLEY

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Bill Oakley is one of the new generation of Marvel bullpen letterers. His assignment, like those of many great letterers who occupied the position before him, is to make last-minute "letter perfect" corrections demanded by the editors on comics pages just before they are due to be sent out to the printer. Bill is expected to duplicate the many different styles of letterers whose work is passed to him at any given moment — instantly. And, with headset donned and favorite tape rolling in his portable cassette player, Oakley is happy to oblige...

DWIGHT JON ZIMMERMAN: *What's your title?*

BILL OAKLEY: I think my official title is letterer, but we've also — when I say

VITAL STATISTICS

Name: Bill Oakley
Born: 1 April 1964 — Oneonta, NY
Occupation: Letterer
Favorite Color Ink: Black, it's most readable. The colored inks seem a little too watery to actually do any work with.
Favorite Fashion Color: Black
Favorite Rolling Stones Song: "Paint It, Black"
Most Frequent Mood: Black. I don't really know what that is, but that's probably it.
Comics That Really Grabbed Imagination When Young: I really liked the monster comics that Marvel used to put out in the early '70s. I really liked WEREWOLF BY NIGHT, FRANKENSTEIN, MAN-THING., DRACULA. That was primarily what first interested me in comics. Then I spanned out into the superheroes and all that stuff.

"I avidly follow SWAMP THING."

"we," I mean the other guys on staff, the other letterers — been doing things like logos, you know, designing and rendering logos.

DWIGHT: *What do you do when you spill India ink all over the pages that you've just lettered?*

BILL: Panic! *(Laughter.)*

DWIGHT: *Have you ever done that?*

BILL: I've splattered ink before on pages; it's not a pleasant feeling. I splattered ink on a **Barry Windsor-Smith** page once. I just kind of dabbed it up and took it over to the art boys who doctored it up without the editors knowing.

DWIGHT: *They'll be madly searching to find out which Windsor-Smith page that was.*

BILL: They'll *never* find it. *(Laughter.)*

DWIGHT: *You've been a letterer on staff at Marvel for about how long?*

BILL: Over a year. I started, I think, in . . . what the hell was it? Maybe July of last year, I think, so it's been well over a year.

DWIGHT: *Is this the sort of thing you've always wanted to do?*

BILL: Actually, no, I kind of got into it by a fluke. Like I imgine just about everybody else in the field, I wanted to be a comics artist.

DWIGHT: *Some of us wanted to be writers.*

BILL: Well, that's true, too, but pretty much everybody starts out wanting to draw comics and they kind of go off in different directions. I can't say it's something I always wanted to do, but I do enjoy it and I plan on sticking with it at least for a few years. Good money in it.

DWIGHT: *What does Bill Oakley do when he's not hunched over the drawing table doing lettering corrections?*

BILL: He sleeps! *(Laughter.)* That's pretty much it. I'm taking on a lot of outside free-lance right now, so pretty much when I'm not at work here or at work at home, I just relax. I need the time just to sleep, watch TV, listen to music, whatever. I don't even draw in my spare time anymore, because I just need to get away from the board.

DWIGHT: *You check out any of the other companies' comics?*

BILL: The only one I avidly follow is SWAMP THING. That's about the only thing that really keeps my interest. I follow it month to month.

DWIGHT: *Is there something of a sense of being jaded? So many superhero stories coming through the mill and that sort of thing? Have you found yourself actually trying to look for something different?*

BILL: Yeah, I do. I used to be heavily

"I don't find superheroes interesting."

The two enemies are closely matched, but even Super Ninja can't stand against Chuck's powerful sidekick.

Bill illustrated the CHUCK NORRIS COLORING BOOK.

into superhero comics. I guess mostly it's just because of the fact that I'm working with them all now, I don't really find them all that interesting. I find a lot of stories that are kind of repeating themselves, you know.

DWIGHT: *What would Bill Oakley do to make those stories interesting?*

BILL: I don't know. I can't really give you any solutions. I don't really find the interest in them that I did when I was younger — but if something is to catch my attention it definitely wouldn't be a superhero comic. Something different.

DWIGHT: *How did you get here?*

BILL: Well... I've been asking *myself* that, too. *(Laughter.)* I sent in some lettering samples to Marvel a little over a year ago and apparently they came right about at a time where **Ron Zalme** needed to hire a new staff letterer, because **Danny Crespi** was sick at that time, and according to him they came right in the nick of time. He called me up, asked me if I'd like to come out for an interview, which I did, and within a week he let me know that I had the job. So I packed all my stuff and moved down here.

DWIGHT: *Is there any particular style that you try to follow or emulate?*

BILL: I would have to say **John Costanza,** more than anybody else. I like to think that my lettering style is unique but, you know, obviously, with so few letterers, you end up comparing somebody to somebody else. I'd have to say, if it would be anybody, it would be **John Costanza.** I'd like to think I letter like him.

DWIGHT: *What logos do you think are the most striking or probably the best-rendered?*

BILL: I think the original AMAZING

"You get to pretty much do what you

Compare layout to finished logo below.

SPIDER-MAN is one of the best. It hasn't really changed over the years. I like that they've never dabbled with that one. A lot of logos have changed. I like the fact that that one stayed the same. I think it holds up well after all the years.

DWIGHT: *How so?*

BILL: It's just got a really nice look to it, you know. I think it fits the character well. It works.

DWIGHT: *How about anybody else or any other titles?*

BILL: I think some of the New Universe logos are nice. Not meaning to push ourselves, but I like some of the logos that **Ken Lopez** has done.

DWIGHT: *And they were?*

BILL: The new IRON MAN. He did it.

DWIGHT: *That's not New Universe.*

BILL: Well, he had done some New Universe: PSI FORCE, STAR BRAND. I think he's got a good design sense. I think he's well-suited for that type of work, as far as logos, new designs.

DWIGHT: *Have you designed any, yourself?*

BILL: I did the new MEPHISTO logo. I guess that's probably the only one that I've designed. I've rendered a few.

DWIGHT: *What do you mean, exactly, by rendering?*

BILL: Well, for example, the KICKERS logo was designed by **Bill Valley.** He gave me the idea to actually do the finished version.

DWIGHT: *He gave you the design and you finished it?*

BILL: Right.

DWIGHT: *Well, with the logos themselves, what do you look for? What makes a good logo?*

BILL: First of all, it's got to be a good design, obviously. I think it should be nice and bold. It should be something that when you see it in the store, you know, it should *pop* out from across the room. You should be able to spot it. You should be able to read it from across the room. It shouldn't die on the cover, as a lot of them that I have seen do.

DWIGHT: *You said that presently your life consists of working and sleeping — I'll assume that eating fits in there somewhere —*

BILL: Wherever I can fit it in. *(Laughter.)*

DWIGHT: *But certainly you had a life before Marvel, had interests before Marvel. What goes on in the mind of Bill Oakley when he's not immersed in comicdom?*

BILL: Well, I don't know. As far as a career, this has actually been the only thing I've ever considered, seriously, to do. I pretty much always wanted to draw comics. I went to the **Joe Kubert** school for a year, and the amount of homework that we got just kind of soured my taste for comics in a way. I didn't feel I could really handle the amount of work that a comic artist has. I didn't feel I could handle the workload, so I thought, you know, what else could I do that's still in the comics industry? Lettering, I thought, was a good choice, good as any. It got me here, anyway.

DWIGHT: *What's been your biggest challenge so far?*

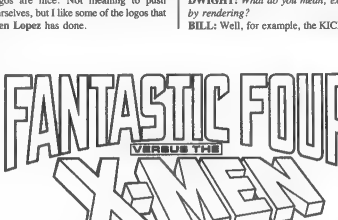
BILL: Deadlines, I guess. As a particular book, the VISION/SCARLET WITCH mini-series that I worked on, that's probably the most copy-heavy book that I've worked on yet. That was kind of an experience, working on that. I enjoyed it. That's probably the *hairiest* job I've worked on yet.

DWIGHT: *Are you one of the letterers who is into the view that the worst writers are the heavy-copy writers and the best writers are the light-copy writers?*

BILL: No, I wouldn't say that. Not from a reader's standpoint.

DWIGHT: *From a letterer's standpoint?*

BILL: From a letterer's standpoint, well, I wouldn't say the best writers . . it's definitely easier for us when we manage to grab a free-lance book that's, you know,



want with splash pages, strut your stuff."

copy-light. I don't mind. If it's a good story, you know, just that I'm associated with it's nice in itself.

DWIGHT: *In the arcane art of balloon placement, what aggravates a letterer the most?*

BILL: When a writer indicates where a balloon is to go, but the amount of copy that's supposed to fit in there absolutely will not fit. That's gotta be the most irritating thing. I've come across a lot of those. They'll indicate it in a little tiny area right over somebody's head and you know, if you letter it, it's gonna go way into the art.

DWIGHT: *In cases like that, do you go over and talk to the editor and tell them what they want can't be done?*

BILL: Sometimes, I may. Usually, I will do most of my lettering on a weekend, so if I got some work I really want to get done, I can't really wait until Monday to see whoever and discuss this. If I come to something like that, I'll do that on vellum. There's usually not more than a panel or two a page where that will happen, so I'll just letter those panels on vellum and, you know, that's when it's up to the editor what he wants to do, shrink the work down or, you know, have the work re-lettered to fit better, or whatever he wants to do.

DWIGHT: *With copy placement, itself, have you found yourself shifting things around?*

BILL: Yeah, I have. You know, if I see something that — like I say, I know is not going to fit — I may move the placement a bit so that it still will read in the correct order. Usually, the editors don't say too much about that, as long as it fits and you're not blocking any important art and, you know, the balloons are not taking up too much space.

DWIGHT: *What sort of advice would you give to a letterer for, say, one of the independents, who do not have all of the valuable training you have?* (Laughter.)

BILL: As far as how to become a better letterer?

DWIGHT: *A pointer, more or less — what to look for, how to stage things in lettering?*

BILL: Well, some of the lettering I've seen for some of the independent companies looks like a lot of their letterers are using Rapidographs. I think maybe even **John Workman** may use a Rapidograph. I started out using them and I find them very hard to work with, so I'm wondering if a lot of letterers out there are finding out this is really uncomfortable, but don't know what else to use. So, if there is anything I could pass on, it would

The Vison/Scarlet Witch mini-series was the most copy-heavy job Bill has had to letter.

probably be to get hold of a #107 Crowquill point and file it down and work with that. That seems to work best for me, and pretty much anybody I've talked to uses the same thing.

DWIGHT: *When letterers like Rick Parker and occasionally Jim Novak and other guys come into the office, do you wind up swapping horror stories with them?*

BILL: I don't really have that many horror stories yet to draw on, 'cause I've only been doing it for a year, but I do like to hear Rick's stories. He's definitely got a wide collection of horror stories. I listen to him a lot when he comes in. He gives me a lot of pointers. Between him and **Phil Felix**, they've both helped me a lot as far as, you know, being good enough that I can get work.

DWIGHT: *What's the ideal balloon shape?*

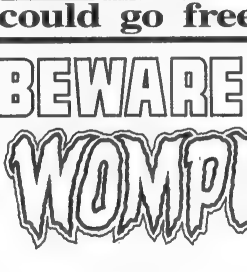
BILL: *(Laughter.)* I don't know. I think **Jim Novak** gives the best balloon shapes, as far as that goes. I prefer to do them freehand only, because it's easier for me. It's easier and quicker, and I can make them look fairly clean. I really like the look of **Jim Novak's** work. I like the fact that his balloons are so clean. He uses templates for that. I find freehand works best for me.

"I hope I could go freelance."

DWIGHT: *Verse balloons, how difficult are they?*
BILL: Well, once you get them penciled out, the inking's a piece of cake, but I still have trouble getting them penciled out so they don't look really weird, so they're pretty much balanced and not too spikey. It's something you just gotta play around with until you learn what works best for you.

DWIGHT: *Captions in italics and word balloons in, you know, very bold strokes — any problems getting the two crossed up every so often?*

BILL: I haven't done that myself, but I have seen cases where things will come through production that, you know, a letterer may have lettered a word balloon italicized, just totally spaced out or something.
DWIGHT: *One of those 3:00 in the morning too-much-coffee things?*
BILL: Could very well be. *(Laughter.)* I've had a few of those myself where . . . but I *haven't* screwed anyting up beyond correction!
DWIGHT: *The challenge of bold words —*
BILL: Well, what can I say about bold words? I like as few bold words as possible, basically, because if you have a lot of bold words in a sentence you have to stop and change your pen, you know, which really slows you down if you're trying to knock a lot of work out. The fewer bold words there are, you can just stick to one pen and go right at it. They'll definitely slow you down. But, you know, bold words are nice. They work. They're necessary.
DWIGHT: *Splash pages?*
BILL: They're fun! I do like doing them. I like designing. You get to design the title, you know, for that issue. It's fun. It's kind of a challenge. You get to pretty much do what you want there, strut your stuff.



DWIGHT: *The comparison of hand lettering for comic books, which you do, to using typeset copy?*

BILL: I don't think typeset copy works too well with comics. It kinda destroys the look of it being a comic book. I know there is some stuff, TENDER HEARTS — kind of romance novels . . .
DWIGHT: *Oh, that we were doing at Marvel, not too long ago?*

BILL: Yeah. I didn't really care for the look of that. They typeset some of those and a couple of them were handlettered. Personally, I don't think they work. Typeset just doesn't mesh with comic books, not as it was done.
DWIGHT: *Does it seem to draw too much attention to the words or —*
BILL: Definitely, and something that's typeset you can't really . . . the balloons are really hard to fit around the copy. You have to rely on templates, you know, and it's hard to fit a template around some of the bodies of copy the way they come out. I think it's easier if the letterer just letters it to, you know, what he thinks is the best proportion. Then he can pretty much squeeze a balloon in around it and he can stack words the way he wants to and basically get it to fit the space as best it can. I don't think with typesetting you can really *do* that. With captions maybe, but not word balloons.
DWIGHT: *Sound effects?*
BILL: They're fun. You get to do a lot of whacky stuff. I really like **Rick Parker's** sound effects. He really gets into it when he's doin' it, he's got some really wild stuff.
DWIGHT: *Are you talking letter shapes now?*
BILL: Yeah. Especially for the Star comics 'cause he does some really good goofy kind of sound effects which I think really work well with the types of books that he's doing them for. I like sound effects.
DWIGHT: *What do you hope to be doing this time next year?*
BILL: I would hope, by this time next year, that I would have enough work that I could go free-lance. I wouldn't mind the idea of working at home. That kind of appeals to me, not having to get up at 6:00 every morning to commute here. That I *definitely* would look forward to.

Most of us probably take lettering effects like these for granted — Bill can't! Like this unused logo design for JUSTICE, a lot of work goes into them. And, okay, Bill — we'll be sure to warn COMICS INTERVIEW readers to watch out for the wompus. (Sheesh!)

"We're the only company with sales reps."

STEVE SCHANES

Steve Schanes co-founded Pacific Distribution and Pacific Comics, both of which are gone, but as current publisher of Blackthorne, Steve is still dedicated to the business, as you'll see here in the first of two parts that deal with the past and the present. . .

MARK BORAX: *I'm talking with Steve Schanes, publisher of Blackthorne Comics, formerly of Pacific Comics. What are you doing to make Blackthorne better than a lot of the other publishers that are out there?*

STEVE SCHANES: We have tunnel vision. We don't look, basically, at other people's product. We conceive a concept for a product line and we reach that goal no matter what it takes, and win or lose we don't compromise the product in midstream. I think that will put us on the cutting edge, will make us leaders, in a very short period of time; whereas the vast majority of the people in the industry are followers, without the entrepreneurial spirit. Given somebody with sufficient entrepreneurial spirit, they can easily be overrun.

MARK: *What would be an example of things that you do in the entrepreneurial spirit that you don't see other people doing?*

STEVE: Blackthorne is aggressive in everything that it does. We aggressively go after a product we think is commercial. We aggressively promote and sell our product. We believe we can make a profit on our product as a comio item, whereas one of the two major publishers more or less is a licensing arm of a major corporation and has until recently not worried about profits being made on the comics. They worried about licensing the characters to realize a profit. That's why you would see a lot of that company's product out on newsstands, even though they were selling maybe 20% of the run, and the whole run may be only 80,000 copies. They were losing money there. They had to have the character on sale, for exposure, so the people licensing it will think it is hot. They didn't really worry about what was inside the covers, so you

Milt Caniff's Steve Canyon meets Thorne Black (Steve Schanes in disguise!)

"I needed to have a job to pay my debts

saw about 20 years of very bland product. You could always tell that company's product before you even opened the pages. The other company either had the best or the worst products, and they were always going for short-term profit. Now they're getting very homogenized and worrying about licensing revenue as opposed to profit from the product.

Every month Blackthorne publishes a 16-page solicitation — we produce 40,000 copies — and give these to the retailers and distributors. This is something we spend a great deal of time on. It is our most important sales tool. It details every product, gives a sales pitch, pertinent information as far as price, page count, physical packaging, and enough art from which a retailer can order correctly; and we list the editorial contents so there's no surprises. After a number of years of this, now, we've built up credibility, so when we have a new product they'll buy it automatically.

Blackthorne has 100 sales reps on the road. We're the only company in the comics industry that has any sales reps, as far as I can tell, and these sales reps don't sell to comic-book stores. These sales reps are instructed *not* to sell to comic stores. We have good market penetration there through our distributors in the comic market; we support those fully. These sales reps go to your Hallmark Cards, your Spencer Gifts, your 7-11s, all across the country, and sell our product to those stores, therefore expanding the marketplace. If a customer happens to go into a Hallmark that has a display of Blackthornes, they may go looking for a back issue or a future issue and they're not going to get it at Hallmark. Hallmark doesn't order every week. They order a certain display of material. The customer would have to go search that comic book out at a comic-book store.

MARK: *Certain Hallmark Cards shops actually sell comic books?*

STEVE: We have 900 to 1200 gift stores we currently rack. We're very aggressive about that because it's quite profitable. It increases our visibility, it increases our profitability, and it gives us momentum, because we have a constantly expanding product line and a product mix, and we can go back to the stores with new product and they'll put us in. We already have an open account.

MARK: *How many titles does Blackthorne publish?*

STEVE: Currently, Blackthorne ships approximately 22 products a month.

MARK: *It's grown a lot.*

STEVE: That's true. We're about 95% on time. When we started Blackthorne three years ago we were putting out about a product or two products every two months. Blackthorne started with very little money. It started on *borrowed* money, $20,000 borrowed off of credit cards. My abilities have always been to sell and promote, and I needed to have a job to pay my debts and to maintain a minimum life-style with my family. Since I could not locate enough work where I was living, I decided to start up another company, so I borrowed on my credit cards and started Blackthorne. But even with $20,000, which is a very minimum amount, when a company starts there's no credit history, so you have to pay for everything up front. We chewed up all of that 20 before we knew it, so we offset not having money by having available hours. My hours were dedicated to business. My family understood that. My wife, Ann E. Fera, is my partner, and she also began to work enormous hours.

We achieved a little momentum, one product out; the orders come in, you try to make a fair deal for yourself and put out two products, promote like hell, make a profit. You start momentum. Now we have systems, everybody drawing art for us turns in work in the correct proportions, and it goes through the systems very smoothly. It's all systems. We cut costs. We try to systemize everything. We try to put out the *most* amount of commercial products with the *least* amount of effort. That's not to say cutting corners, it's just the least amount of effort is the most cost effective way; and every business should be concerned about cost effectiveness.

MARK: *The debts that were incurred at Pacific Comics, did you pay those off?*

and maintain a minimum life-style."

STEVE: Pacific went through liquidation. Basically, the problem with Pacific had a lot to do with the growth of the industry as a whole. Pacific started off in 1972, by my brother, **Bill Schanes,** and myself, with $50. In the last year we had gross sales of maybe five million. There were a lot of growth pains. We set a lot of precedents in the industry. Those precedents ate up a lot of dollars. We helped start the whole distribution system for the comic industry. We were one of the first direct distributors. Nationally, we helped set up hundreds of the current stores of today. All of that took a lot of money. *That* money was generated by profits and borrowing. Pacific had to borrow money at very high interest rates, in the 20s. Those were the going interest rates at the banks.

MARK: *When was that?*

STEVE: That was in the late '70s. Pacific did not generate enough profit to cover those interest rates. The distribution business is very hard. Unless you're extremely large, it's a nonprofit business. Servicing the debt got to be a very high percentage of our payables, and we miscalculated the amount of inventory needed to sustain our operation. We ended up with a lot of inventory which did not move at a rapid enough pace. We fought with that for a number of years, until we got to the realization that we were not going to make enough money to ever pay off our payables. That's when we decided to go through liquidation. We had two companies under the corporate umbrella at that time. There was Pacific Comics Distribution, which was losing money every month, and there was Pacific Comics Publishing, which was making a lot of money. Unfortunately, the money *lost* through distribution was a lot more than the money *gained* in publishing, and we pulled the plug; but we made sure that most of the creators found homes. Very few artists were left with payables. That was Pacific Comics' situation.

Pacific *did* set up a lot of precedents. There are all of the other independents today because the ice was broken. Artists and creators are making a lot of money today because the precedents were set. If Pacific had not come along when it did, then artists would still be making $60. a page today, and there would be *no* innovative packaging. It would be similar to what it was before. It was Pacific..., well, sooner or later it was going to

PLANET COMICS™ © 1988 Caplin-Iger, Ltd.
Cover Art © 1988 Dave Stevens

"People assumed that I had cut and run."

happen, people seeing there were options available.

MARK: *But you kind of broke the ice.*

STEVE: We were the first ones and we just took the risk. We thought we'd like to try publishing. We were a large distributor. We were taking 20% of the print runs that was going into the direct market, sometimes more, and thought we could try being a publisher. We went in as Pacific Comics — we had known **Jack Kirby** for awhile — and talked to Jack. Jack had a concept for a comic but he wanted to own it. We worked it out. With CAPTAIN VICTORY, we thought we would be lucky to get an order of about 25,000. It came in at 110,000. We thought, "There's something going on here!" *(Laughter.)* We came up with a unique contract with the artists which was passed around throughout the industry. We got a lot of input from professionals to make sure it was fair. Now it's basically the standard contract of all independents, one form or another. We made a deal with **Mike Grell** on the second book, and the story goes on from there.

We kept evolving. We kept reinvesting the dollars. We did real well. But *all* of that growth and *all* of that trial and error led to a point where we just couldn't handle the debt situation. We did not have enough *experience* to know how to work ourselves out of the debt. Bill and myself — I started in the business when I was 17, he was 13 — never had any formal business training. We actually could have gotten out of the debt situation by selling off part of the business. We just did not have the expertise. So that was that story.

MARK: *And the feelings that may have been bruised when Pacific folded and wasn't able to pay its debts, have those been soothed? Do you think Blackthorne has any kind of shade of that?*

STEVE: Initially, when Pacific went through liquidation, people related to Pacific during the last six months — which was a very negative experience to a lot of people — they ignored the 13 1/2 years before that, which was a very positive experience. Getting hurt with bad receivables is always a painful. Some of those payables got paid off, some of them didn't. When Blackthorne started up, almost immediately when Pacific went out, people falsely assumed that I had cut and run. I have proved them wrong. I don't think there's anybody that worked with me at Pacific that wouldn't work with me today if I just gave them a call.

MARK: *So, some of the receivables that didn't get paid haven't hurt you from going forward?*

Steve Schanes with the invincible Burne Hogarth, of syndicated TARZAN fame.

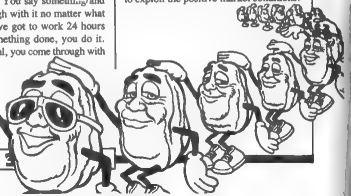
STEVE: No. I think I am better off for the failure, in that I now know how to run a business real efficiently. I think that the people that got hurt with the uncollected receivables now believe in me. I work with people all of the time that have failed me in the past, but I know that they are willing to try again. I'm willing enough to try again.

MARK: *So, largely, you are in a position of trust? You want to gain trust and you also have to give trust.*

STEVE: You earn trust. You build on your reputation. You say something and you come through with it no matter what it takes. If you've got to work 24 hours a day to get something done, you do it. If you make a deal, you come through with it, to the best of your ability. There are always factors out there that will impede you, but to the best of your ability you come through with it.

MARK: *Are you happy with how Blackthorne has been earning trust over the past three years?*

STEVE: Blackthorne is doing very well right now. We have a very good cash flow position. Blackthorne has very good relations with all distributors and all retailers. The market conditions are positive. Blackthorne came along at the right time to exploit the positive market conditions.



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"You cannot think negative thoughts."

© 1986 CalPoly

MARK: *I'm feeling here you've learned caution from what happened previously.*

STEVE: Well, I don't think I've learned caution. I don't believe in caution, not when you're an entrepreneur. I believe in evaluating risk. If you start worrying about too much caution, then you'll... you won't be a leader. You won't be in the foreground. You won't be on the cutting edge. That's a *thrill*. It's an addiction, being on the cutting edge. I don't mind making mistakes. I like to be the person responsible for the mistake, and I like to be the person responsible for the victory. I look at profitability more now than at Pacific. I want to make sure we're really highly profitable, so I can continue to pay the bills. If you're not concerned with profitability then you will not be profitable.

MARK: *Blackthorne is doing something kind of unusual, too, with all of the reprint stuff, like the DICK TRACY stuff. How did that all come about?*

STEVE: The newspaper reprints were some of the first products we brought out. When I started Blackthorne I had to come up with a product mix which we could do at the minimum of cost, with very little downside potential, with a positive upside potential in profitability. I decided one of the properties we could go into was newspaper strips. I am a good negotiator, and newspaper strips have been around for a long time; they were available, I could negotiate for them. I could reprint them for a fee and come out with a product for which there was not a whole lot of competition at that time.

MARK: *And you also don't have to pay creators.*

STEVE: Well, the creators get paid through the syndicates. We don't pay the creators directly. When you're starting a new company you don't want to go head-to-head against a major competition. You want to find a niche.

MARK: *Something you can give that they don't?*

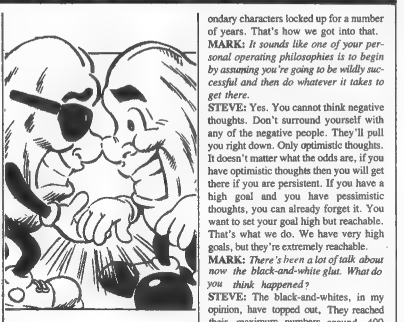
STEVE: Right. Find a niche, exploit the niche, get yourself some momentum, build up a cash flow; find another niche, exploit it, build up a cash flow; until you're on a roll and you're quite profitable. Then you can start being competitive as far as mainline product. That's where we got in. Initially, I thought this was the product base that we wanted. We made the commitment. We signed up 60 different titles — even though I knew I wouldn't use them for years and years — and we locked it up... we couldn't negotiate for GARFIELD or BLOOM COUNTY because they are beyond our economic level. The things right underneath that, ondary characters locked up for a number of years. That's how we got into that.

MARK: *It sounds like one of your personal operating philosophies is to begin by assuming you're going to be wildly successful and then do whatever it takes to get there.*

STEVE: Yes. You cannot think negative thoughts. Don't surround yourself with any of the negative people. They'll pull you right down. Only optimistic thoughts. It doesn't matter what the odds are, if you have optimistic thoughts then you will get there if you are persistent. If you have a high goal and you have pessimistic thoughts, you can already forget it. You want to set your goal high but reachable. That's what we do. We have very high goals, but they're extremely reachable.

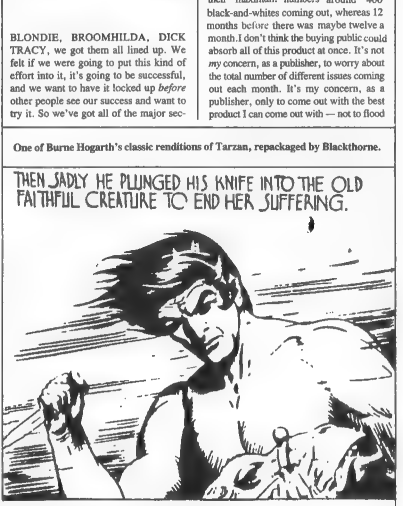
MARK: *There's been a lot of talk about now the black-and-white glut. What do you think happened?*

STEVE: The black-and-whites, in my opinion, have topped out. They reached their maximum numbers around 400 black-and-whites coming out, whereas 12 months before there was maybe twelve a month. I don't think the buying public could absorb all of this product at once. It's not *my* concern, as a publisher, to worry about the total number of different issues coming out each month. It's my concern, as a publisher, only to come out with the best product I can come out with — not to flood



BLONDIE, BROOMHILDA, DICK TRACY, we got them all lined up. We felt if we were going to put this kind of effort into it, it's going to be successful, and we want to have it locked up *before* other people see our success and want to try it. So we've got all of the major sec-

One of Burne Hogarth's classic renditions of Tarzan, repackaged by Blackthorne.



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"We created a prop for Spielberg."

Possibly the most distinctive comics profile ever — Dick Tracy's, from Blackthorne's golden oldies.

the marketplace with drek. I didn't worry about 200 black-and-whites a month. I worried about 20 Blackthorne black-and-whites a month. If I can produce the best product that I can, then those will be the only products left. I don't intend to have my products hurt by 120 other products.

They worry about us, we don't worry about them. Never worry about your competition. Just have tunnel vision. Set a goal and go for it no matter what it takes. If you're a retailer, don't worry about it if six people move onto your block. Have the best service possible and they will leave. If you start worrying about them then you will spend all of your time worrying about them and you will not sell any comics. Just focus in and do it. It doesn't matter what the challenge is. If you want to be — God's honest truth, this is America — you can actually be what you want to be. You can *fail* and *still* be what you want to be.

MARK: *I understand that Blackthorne is into some things outside of comics, can you tell us about that?*

STEVE: Blackthorne is a diversified company with a sole direction. We have a line of activity that the comic-book fans aren't aware of. We are currently producing a great deal of props for TV and movies. These are, when you see a movie and an actor reaches for a comic book or a book, somebody has to create this type of prop. We have been doing that. We've created a number of props for movies. We created a prop for **Steven Spielberg's** AMAZING STORIES, a children's book. It looks just like a **Dr. Seuss** children's book. In this particular episode there was this cartoon animal that romps around this housewife's house. The reason it romps around is because this housewife threw away this book. It actually was the creature featured in the book, and the moment she retrieves

"We have a reputation in the film industry."

STEVE, THIS IS THORNE BLACK! I TOLD YOU HE CALLED...
YES, MR. BLACK, WHAT CAN I DO FOR YOU?
MILTON CANIFF
MY CARD!
AH, BOOK PUBLISHER, EH?
NOT QUITE AS INTERESTING AS FLYING AN AIRPLANE...
...BUT SOMETIMES AS DANGEROUS!

it from the trash he vanishes. She's constantly referring to this book. It's the central prop of the whole episode.

MARK: *Did you just have to create a cover, or do they go through the pages?*

STEVE: There's about ten pages throughout the book that she'll open up to look and she'll see herself in... it all plays on each other. In a movie called LOST BOYS we created two comic books about vampires, and those are props throughout the whole movie. These props, we may need to create five of a copy, or 70 or 80. We just finished props for a movie called RUSKIES, a $30 million movie, and we created six different comic books, three technical manuals, and a trade paperback. We don't advertise the fact, but we have now a reputation in the film industry. If you need this type of prop, give us a call. We turn it out very fast for a reasonable rate, and these people may need a prop within 24 hours, and it could be a critical prop. For RUSKIES we put the props on an airplane, first class, to Florida. They paid for a first class seat for the props and had a driver on the other end waiting to pick them up. *(Laughter.)*

Another line of activity we're into, we're starting a line of paperback books. This is to expand our base market. These are books... one book a month by **Harlan Ellison,** who is an internationally acclaimed author. We feel very fortunate to get them. We have negotiated for twelve books. These were previously printed by Berkley. That makes us a legitimate paperback publisher. We're also doing a new book from **Bruce Jones.** The first year the books will be out, which will be 1987, we'll be doing two paperbacks a month. These will be distributed in the comic stores, and we're test marketing them in 600 7-11s and about 1,200 food markets, supermarkets, that sort of thing.

We have one other line of activity we're attempting to do. We have developed a product for a sports store distributor. This is a distributor that sells to 8,000 sports stores. They sell basketballs, baseballs, mitts, all of that stuff. We have come up with a product called BLACKTHORNE SPORTS TIP. These are a monthly product that will be released, color covers, black-and-white insides, sold to initially 800 of these outlets. It's a monthly periodical that tells you how to avoid sports injuries. The first issue is about running. The second issue is about workouts in a gymnasium, like a weight-lifting program. The third one is about baseball. These will give us good profits on our products, and they give us high visibility in other areas.

MARK: *What about any art portfolios, like you used to do at Pacific?*

STEVE: Blackthorne has done five portfolios, the latest being called STRENGTH OF MAN. There's 13 different artists in it, all known artists. It's a black-and-white portfolio. The portfolio market is soft at this point. It comes in cycles. Every four or five years it gets real hot and then it peters out. Right now people are spending more dollars on comics than on portfolios or prints. This will be the last portfolio we'll put out for the foreseeable future.

MARK: *What criteria do you use, as president of the company, to accept a new creative project?*

STEVE: My position is that I am a very good promoter and salesman, and I'm very good at looking at visuals to see if they're commercial. I look at them to see if I like them, and I look at them to see if I can sell them. I'm very poor at critiquing writing. That's not my strength. I leave the writing critiques up to my editors. I leave the visual critique up to myself. If it comes through in its visuals, I can know almost instantaneously whether I can sell it. If it's writing then I've got to pass it on, and the editors will give me a cover letter saying this is strong or this is weak for the following reasons. If it's art and it's strong and I think I'll have space on the schedule, I'll assign a writer. If it's a writer and it comes back to me then I'll assign him an artist. We reject probably about 90% of all the stuff that comes through. We get several submissions in each day.

I believe Blackthorne is a player in the industry right now, and within the next couple of years we will be a major player.

***NEXT ISSUE:** What really happened at Pacific Comics?*

COL. CANYON, SINCE YOU ARE NO LONGER IN UNIFORM AND UNDER DIRECT ORDERS FROM THE AIR FORCE...
...YOU ARE FREE TO WRITE A BOOK ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES—AND OUR FIRM IS INTERESTED IN PUBLISHING IT!
ABOUT WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO YOU SINCE WW II...
...THE WORKING TITLE WILL BE "NO ONE YELLED 'CUT!'"
MILTON CANIFF

BACK ISSUES

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#4-$3.00 **Starlin** speaks about **WARLOCK, CAPTAIN MARVEL & DREADSTAR — DC's Dick Giordano**, part 1 — from **Foster to Frazetta**, the last **Roy G. Krenkel** interview — Cover by **Starlin.**

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"At Commodore I did a lot of work on the bestselling computer book of all time."

NEIL HARRIS

Neil Harris is one of the true stars of the development of the computer industry in the 1980s. Armed only with a few year's experience as a hacker, a job in a computer store, and an English education, Neil began developing his reputation with a series of articles written for usergroup newsletters, eventually for computer magazines. He parlayed his reputation into a position with Commodore. Two years later he was in charge of that company's magazine, resulting in vast changes and increased popularity. In the summer of 1984 he switched over to Atari to take control of that company's magazine, eventually taking charge of all communications and support activities. He also reads comic books...

MARTY HERZOG: *When did you read your first comic book?*

NEIL HARRIS: I was probably five years old. My next-door neighbor in Philadelphia, **Marvin Lenetsky** — who is maybe five years older than I am — he passed a few SUPERMAN and SUPERMAN FAMILY comic books over my way and I was hooked right from the start. I was brought up on a diet of DC comics from a very early age.

MARTY: *Do you remember any particular issues?*

NEIL: Oh sure. The Legion stories — but I've reread them since so it's really not fair — but the whole stretch in the mid-to-late '60s of what they were doing in the Legion were just great stories; you know, where Lightning Lad was killed and then where he was brought back to life and Proty died.

MARTY: *Yeah. I found that very traumatic.*

NEIL: That was very serious stuff back then. It was unusual for comic books. Now it looks a lot tamer.

MARTY: *Especially when you compare it with Supergirl dying.*

NEIL: Right. Right. I'm really not following the current goings-on at DC but I sure stopped in the comic shop long enough to page through that issue and see how Supergirl bought the farm. That was a horrible trauma.

"I'll teach my children my bad habits."

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MARTY: *Okay, so you started reading the DCs when you were five.*

NEIL: Yeah. All throughout elementary school I remember frittering away my lunch money on comic books.

MARTY: *Did your parents know?*

NEIL: No. That's why I was always a skinny kid. There were always two-inch stacks of comic books in my desk in school, at any time, and the teachers didn't really go for that too much; but considering that most of the other kids really didn't read for enjoyment I think that wasn't such a terrible thing. That's not the only things I read — I burned through my grade school library. I was just always very interested in reading. I guess that was all. I wasn't very interested in science fiction and fantasy and adventure stories. I remember at the same time I was getting into comic books I was reading all the DR. SEUSS books that there were and lots of other stuff.

MARTY: *So, from that, you feel that comic books were never a detriment to your education?*

NEIL: Oh no. I mean, where else can you learn that hurricane winds can drive a straw right through a tree? *(Laughter.)* I got that from **FLASH** comics back in the '60s. But seriously, no, it was never a detriment. It's certainly better than not reading. I'm really convinced that educators, if they weren't such snobs, could probably ease some kids who are not into reading by taking them to comic books. At least get them started and say it's not a bad thing for you to read them. At least it's reading.

MARTY: *Will you introduce your children . . .*

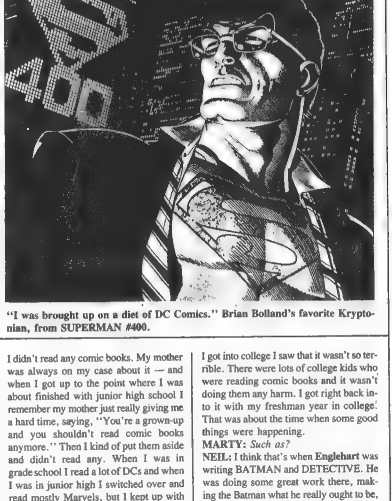
NEIL: Oh, sure. I'll teach them all of my bad habits. *(Laughter.)* My three-year-old already likes my computer. She likes my comic books, too. We sit and we read lots of things together. We've gone back and picked up a lot of those DR. SEUSS books and lots of other good children's books. And my wife works late on Wednesday evenings, so we have this weekly ritual where I pick up my daughter from the sitter and we raid the comic-book store. I pick up whatever the new ones are for the week and she runs around and terrorizes the place. *(Laughter.)*

MARTY: *What's the name of the comic-book store?*

NEIL: It's called Brian's Books. It's just across the border into Santa Clara. It's a great store and carries lots of great stuff, and Brian takes good care of me.

MARTY: *Did your interest in comic books ever wane?*

NEIL: Yeah. When I was in high school I didn't read any comic books. My mother was always on my case about it — and when I got up to the point where I was about finished with junior high school I remember my mother just really giving me a hard time, saying, "You're a grown-up and you shouldn't read comic books anymore." Then I kind of put them aside and didn't read any. When I was in grade school I read a lot of DCs and when I was in junior high I switched over and read mostly Marvels, but I kept up with some of my favorite DC titles, especially BATMAN and DETECTIVE. And then in high school nothing at all. And when I got into college I saw that it wasn't so terrible. There were lots of college kids who were reading comic books and it wasn't doing them any harm. I got right back into it with my freshman year in college. That was about the time when some good things were happening.



"I was brought up on a diet of DC Comics." Brian Bolland's favorite Kryptonian, from SUPERMAN #400.

MARTY: *Such as?*

NEIL: I think that's when **Englehart** was writing BATMAN and DETECTIVE. He was doing some great work there, making the Batman what he really ought to be, this mythic creature of the night. I guess in my sophomore year was when **Starlin** started doing WARLOCK, which was just

VITAL STATISTICS

Name: Neil Harris
Born: 5 September 1955 — Toronto, but raised in Philadelphia
Residence: Silicon Valley

Occupation: Director of Marketing Communications for Atari Corporation
Family: Wife Karen and daughters Elizabeth (3) and Jessica (newborn)

Favorite Comics: THE LEGION; ADVENTURES; BATMAN and DETECTIVE by Englehart and Rogers; FABULOUS FURRY FREAK BROTHERS; GROO; LOVE AND ROCKETS; MIRACLEMAN; Simonson's THOR; WARLOCK

Favorite Science-Fiction Author: An all-time favorite list would include Roger Zelazny and Philip K. Dick and a lot of others. But once you've read everything a guy has written how can he stay your favorite anymore? I have to find new books to read.

"MIRACLEMAN is just mind boggling."

great. That was really the first comic book to me that went beyond the bounds of what normal comic books were supposed to do. I've shared those not with just my wife, who's read those several times through, and my father-in-law, who likes to read comic books too, but with my sister-in-law, my wife's middle sister, who has a PhD in philosophy. She thought there was really a lot to the WARLOCK books. She was very impressed.

MARTY: *Very deep, is that what you're saying?*

NEIL: Well, certainly deeper than you would expect from a comic book. There was a lot of interesting existential philosophy going on in WARLOCK, usually questioning different aspects of the way his life was going. It was interesting and it was very well drawn. The layouts on the pages were extraordinary. That was probably some of my favorite work by Starlin.

MARTY: *Are you picking up books now because of writers or artists or a combination or characters?*

NEIL: I think more than anything I look for artists in comic books, but if the story's not there then no matter how good the artist is it's not worth staying with it. The only writer that I follow strictly right now, because he's so good, is **Alan Moore**. He's doing some great work. I didn't follow his SWAMP THING at all but the MIRACLEMAN comic book from England is just mind boggling. So was WATCHMEN. And the "D.R. and Quinch" stories that he had in 200 A.D. are also wonderful.

MARTY: *What is it about him that's made you like his work?*

NEIL: Well, in the case of MIRACLEMAN he's taken the original kids comic book, CAPTAIN MARVEL COMICS, and just added a depth of meaning to it that nobody would have thought of before. Comic-book writers, I guess, happen to be very adept at adding plot layers and plot twists — that's really what they do — and he's added so many to that hackneyed cliche of a comic book that it's really extraordinary. "D.R. and Quinch" stories are good because they're so punk and they're very anti-social, it makes me laugh. It's a rare comic book that can really make you laugh. There are very few that have ever been able to really pull it off. "D.R. and Quinch" stories have succeeded that way. GROO has been another one that has been a consistent one that can

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"We were the joke of the company."

make me laugh out loud while reading it. The only other one that I can think of are the old FABULOUS FURRY FREAK BROTHERS comics. Those were just hysterical. I remember I used to sit in my mother's house eating milk and cookies late at night and reading "Fat Freddy's Cat" and giggling like a fool. My mother used to think I was on something. *(Laughter.)*

MARTY: *Which books are you looking forward to; like which ones do you want to find every time you go in?*

NEIL: Well, let's see. I want to find a new LOVE AND ROCKETS every week. And a new DARK KNIGHT. I would have said DREADSTAR a few months ago but that lately . . . the pace has slacked off on that quite a bit, as far as what's happening in each issue, and there's not that sense of urgency where you have to go back to find out what's happening now. It's more like a soap opera, you know, where you can skip a few issues and come back and know what's going on, which I think is unfortunate. They should push **Starlin** harder 'cause he can do better.

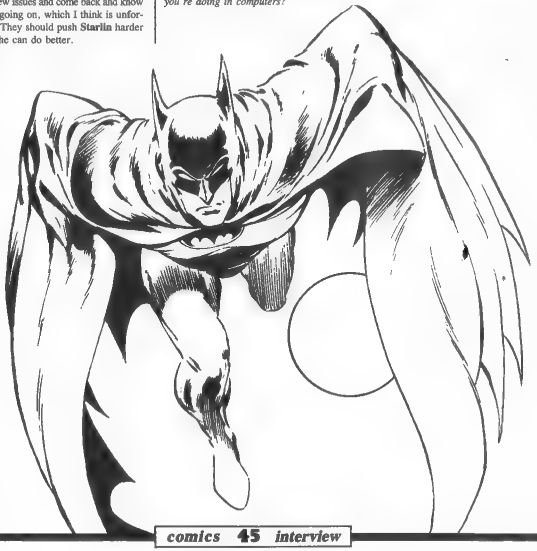
MARTY: *You've mentioned a lot of what would be called the non-mainstream titles. Are you then saying that you're no longer interested in the mainstream?*

NEIL: Yeah. My tastes have gotten much more sophisticated. What used to be appealing to me as a kid just doesn't make it anymore. Really, the superhero things, they're all the same. Every issue they bring in some villain and the villain beats the living daylights out of whoever happens to be the hero, two or three times, and then finally the hero, for no apparent reason, beats the living daylights out of the bad guy and the story ends. It's just no big deal anymore. I found that in science fiction, too, that I can't read a lot of things that I used to enjoy a lot. I have to read more of the sophisticated things, which I guess is okay — it means that my intellect is still moving.

MARTY: *Is there any way that comics influenced you in moving through what you're doing in computers?*

NEIL: I don't think so. It's hard to say. I've really been lucky in that I've been able to make the things that I enjoy doing pay for me, but comic books are something that I've never figured out how to work into the big picture. *(Laughter.)* What I do now crystalized when I was in high school, splitting my extracurricular time between two main activities, the computer club and the literary magazine. Since then I've done a lot of programming and writing about computers.

I had always considered myself a writer. I was an English major in college and mostly took creative writing courses and studied a lot of fiction, so it's a very rare blend of skill to be able to understand computers and to be able to communicate what you understand to people. It's a very technical subject and most people's eyes glaze over when you start talking to them



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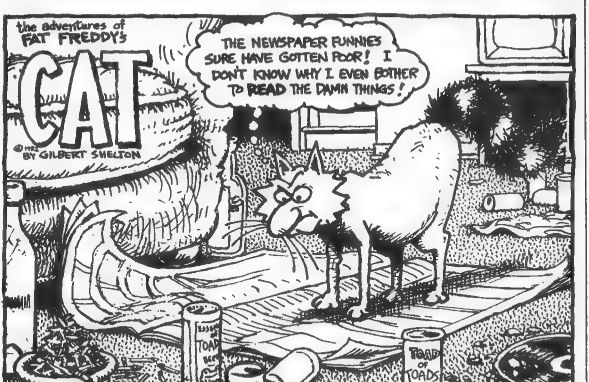
"Our philosophy at the time was to steal


the adventures of FAT FREDDY'S
CAT
BY GILBERT SHELTON
THE NEWSPAPER FUNNIES SURE HAVE GOTTEN POOR! I DON'T KNOW WHY I EVEN BOTHER TO READ THE DAMN THINGS!
TOAD OIL
HOARD OF TOADS
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One of Neil's favorite strips — THE FREAK BROTHERS. Fat Freddy's Cat confronts the terrifying menace of — TODAY'S COMIC STRIPS!! From FREAK BROTHERS #7, published in San Francisco by Rip Off Press, Inc.

about it. So all the experience I had in retail blended with the writing experience I had so that I built up that combination of skills. Then I joined Commodore about four or five months before the VIC 20 was first sold. I was part of the VIC 20 development team, which we affectionately called the VIC Commandos. We were part of a sixty-million-dollar company that was making business computers and not being very successful at the time with business computers in the U.S., that had this organization set up with regional headquarters, and we were this little group of five guys who were playing with this toy computer. We were the joke of the company. *(Laughter.)* It was fine because we knew that we had a tiger by the tail. We knew that at that price, at $300 for a color computer that spoke a true dialect of Basic, that it was gonna be a great thing, so we did everything. I wrote most of the manual. I wrote and edited most of the VIC 20 PROGRAMMER'S REFERENCE GUIDE. We did all of the brochures and I wrote programs and we did demonstrations. And I met **Jack Tramiel** and the whole board of directors my first week on the job — a very informal company that way — and it worked! We were this little group of five people and we couldn't get any cooperation from the rest of the company who thought we were jokers because we were dedicated and we were working late, about an hour after everyone else had left the building. We'd swipe whatever equipment we needed to get our jobs done. *(Laughter.)* There was no other way to get the work done! We'd steal the equipment and they'd discover it was missing and they would just order more stuff from the warehouse, so everybody had what they needed to do their work. And great things happened. And later on at Commodore, during my second year on the job, I wrote some other manuals, a diskdrive manual, and did a lot of work on the C64 PROGRAMMER'S REFERENCE GUIDE, which turned out to be the bestselling computer book of all time — I only wish they had paid me in royalties instead of paying my salary because I would have ended up making a lot more than I ended up making. Then the editor of the Commodore magazine left the company for a good opportunity in a software operation. I was getting bored with the specific position I was in — I was doing a lot of traveling which I really didn't enjoy too much — and so I got into the magazine side of things. I was able to bluff my way in by showing them that I had written some articles before and that I had worked on a fanzine in the Philadelphia Science-Fiction Society, which I was president of for a year and I was very active with at the time — and things went very well for the magazine. It was partially because I read a lot of other computer magazines and was able to steal good ideas that were floating around. *(Laughter.)*

MARTY: *That's very honest of you.*

NEIL: Well, look, our philosophy at Commodore at the time — very informal philosophy among a few of us — steal anything that Apple ever did right, because they may have done a lot of things right but their pricing was high enough, it was $1,500 for an Apple II System, that most people couldn't afford it. A whole group

anything that Apple ever did right."

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A GROUP OF
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of people that could afford VIC 20 and Commodore 64s had never been able to afford a computer before so they didn't know that we were copying Apple's ideas and doing the same kind of software and the same kind of products. But they knew we were doing good things so they were happy, and we were happy, too. We patterned our manuals after the way Apple patterned their manuals, because we thought they were doing it right — and we put out a lot of software. We put out Scott Adams Adventure Games on cartridges and our sales guys could not figure out what they were gonna do with them. "What are these games? It's all words on the screen! There's no graphics! What kind of a video game doesn't have video?" *(Laughter)* And they became the best-selling cartridges for the VIC 20, period. We sold hundreds of thousands of Scott Adams Adventure Games cartridges. Because we knew they sold well on the Apple, they were among the best games going at the time — why wouldn't they work with the VIC 20? And, of course, they did.

MARTY: *So, how did that lead you to Atari?*

NEIL: Well, came that fateful C.E.S. show in January of '84 — a very strange press conference. **Jack Tramiel** got on stage in front of a whole ballroom full of press people to make the announcement that in the calendar year of 1983 Commodore had sold more than a billion dollars worth of products. Just phenomenal. In three years the company had grown from under $100 million to over a billion dollar corporation. Just unbelievable growth. A great success story. But Jack was on stage and he didn't look like a happy man, and Jack was not someone to hide his emotions generally — it just seemed strange for some of us in the back of the room. Three days after the show, Jack announced that he was resigning from the company. Apparently there had been some falling out between him and the chairman of the board, **Irving Gould**, and from that day on the company was not the same place. The day that the announcement was made the whole company went into a daze which I believe it has still not recovered from.

That was in January. By May most of the top executives who I really respected had left the company, including our top engineer, **Shiraz Shivji**, and his group of engineers, and **Greg Pratt**, one of the people that I worked with very closely at Commodore on a day-to-day basis that I respected a great deal and who is now V.P. of Finance at Atari. One after another of the people that I enjoyed and respected at Commodore weren't there anymore. The people that were rising to the top were the executives that I really didn't care for too much. And then at the

MARY WORTHLESS
MARY WORTHLESS WAS A LOT MORE INTERESTING BEFORE SHE HAD HER STROKE!
IT'S A PITY SHE CAN'T TALK ANY MORE
WE ARE SURE!
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"The average person hasn't got a clue

AND THE "FUNNY" ONES... FUNNY COLLEGE STUDENTS, FUNNY MERCENARY SOLDIERS, FUNNY FOREIGNERS, FUNNY LEGUMES... (SIGH)..
CRANK
AND WHAT DO YOU COME TO BE A MERCENARY, CRANK?
A BROKEN LOVE AFFAIR, REMORSE? OR PERHAPS YOU ARE RUNNING FROM THE LAW?
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by GRUNT PORKER
RANDY CRAPP
SLAM!
by AWOHC
PEANUTS
AIEEEEE
CRUNCH!
by SHMALTZ
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very end of June or the beginning of July, Jack bought Atari.

And then it was war. Apparently the falling out between Jack and Irving was not a pleasant one. In fact, we had an editorial in the Commodore magazine using one of the famous sayings of Chairman Jack — I forget which one it was, but he had lots of little quotes that he was known for — and he had been the founder of the company with more than 25 years there — so we printed this editorial and as soon as it hit print we started getting flak from the very top of the company that we shouldn't have used that and we shouldn't have used Jack's name in our magazine. **Jack Tramiel** had become an unperson as far as Commodore was concerned. It got so bad that not only couldn't you mention his name and say that he'd ever done anything good, but any policy he'd had to be completely overturned. If the company had been doing poorly they could maybe say it was his fault and start doing things differently, but when the company's doing so well, having such a degree of success that is beyond the dreams of most normal businesses, to take that point of view has gotta be fatal. So by the summertime I was very depressed and not enjoying work. The company's pace had slowed to the point where my boss told me that if I didn't have much to do then I should just look busy, which was a first in almost four years at the company.

The word kind of passed through the grapevine that it would be a good idea for me to contact the people out in California who had joined Atari. I'd spent 25 years of my life in Philadelphia and had family and friends and a lot of roots there, so I was reluctant. But my wife saw that I wasn't enjoying myself and she encouraged me to give the west coast a call, and we came out and they brought me aboard, primarily to get the magazine up and running again.

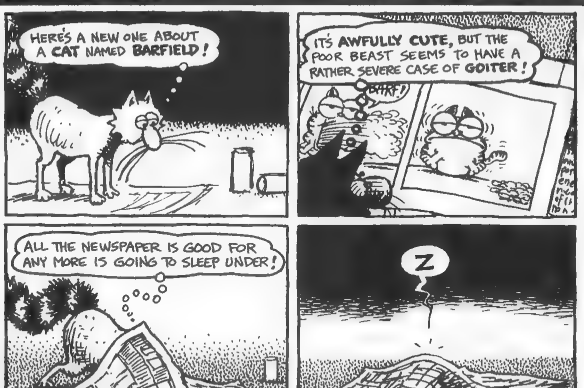
There was an old magazine called ATARI CONNECTION that was very much like the Commodore magazine before I got into the picture, which is that it's something that's politically safe in the corporation, a magazine full of articles on smiling people who love their Atari computers. The unfortunate thing is that there aren't enough presidents and vice presidents of the company to support that magazine. If you want people to *buy* it then you have to offer them something of value to them. So I turned it around and made it more of a magazine with lots of tutorials and reviews and articles about how to use a computer hands-on. That was the formula for success at Commodore.

MARTY: *What exactly is your job?*

NEIL: It's a marketing position where I'm expected to understand the product well enough to make sure that all of the pieces are together and that the packaging is right and the flyers and press releases and all of that are coming out properly. I get involved a little bit with discussions about new hardware and directions we should take. I've also got the responsibility for customer support and for the publications, which is our magazine, our dealer newsletter, and electronic publications, which is on-line services.

You know, my experiences in the old days of being a Commodore user on the outside have affected me very profoundly. The average person hasn't got a clue how to make their computer work. I am determined to keep the documentation

how to make their computer work."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IT'S AWFULLY CUTE, BUT THE POOR BEAST SEEMS TO HAVE A RATHER SEVERE CASE OF GOITER!
BARF!
ALL THE NEWSPAPER IS GOOD FOR ANY MORE IS GOING TO SLEEP UNDER!
Z

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understandable and complete, with whatever information you need. It doesn't have to be so heavyhanded as most of the manuals are. The VIC 20 manual is lots of fun. We had a program where we were demonstrating if-thens and we made it a recipe program. If you typed in that you wanted the chicken soup recipe then you could see the chicken soup recipe: Throw a chicken in the pot and boil it until the house smells good. You can lighten up that way and make people feel a lot more comfortable reading through it and still get the message across. I enjoy doing that because I like computers and I think that it's good for people, so I guess I'm kind of an evangelist. That's really what it's been through whatever my official title is. I know only Apple has official titles like that — but the idea is to do what you can to make it as easy and as fun as possible.

MARTY: *Do you think there's any type of a connection between comic books and computers?*

NEIL: I think there's a connection in personality among computer users and a lot of other things. Well, basically, what I'm interested in is computer programming, science fiction, comic books, war-gaming, and movies — which is more my wife's area than mine; she has seen virtually every old movie that there is. There are a lot of people whose interests seem to overlap in many of those same areas. Somebody should do a psychological study. Maybe they'll get their doctoral thesis out of it. *(Laughter.)* It all seems to go together. There's been some great science fiction about computers, and obviously a lot of interest in computers among comic-book people.

MARTY: *I've often wondered about that because I've noticed my adult friends who are — I don't want to say hard core — but still followers and with an interest, they're always people who look to the future, the futurists.*

NEIL: Maybe that's what it is; the common element is imagination. A lot of the programmers at Atari are very interested in science fiction. **Leonard Tramiel** and his wife are very seriously into science fiction and we swap names of good books back and forth regularly.

MARTY: *Science fiction and fantasy, it almost goes hand-in-hand — everybody who does that has to have a computer, if they can afford one and if they are not intimidated.*

NEIL: Right. Well, I've been very lucky all along. I've always been very interested in computers and I've never had to go out and buy one. *(Laughter.)* I started working in computer stores when home computers first became available, had machines to play with there, and when I joined Commodore I had VIC 20s and then Commodore 64s to take home, and now at Atari I have an ST to take home, which is wonderful. It's displaced everything else from my computer table except for the 8-bit computer that Elizabeth, my three-year-old, uses. *(Laughter.)* She sees me on it all of the time and she wants to come bang on the keys, but usually someone else banging on the keys with random keystrokes is not a good thing for whatever you're working on. But it's nice because I've been able to indulge my hobby as a living, which is a wonderful thing, and I hope that everyone who reads this goes out and buys one of our computers so everything is wonderful and the industry starts booming again.

MARTY: *Okay. You want to put in a plug for the Atari ST?*

NEIL: The ST is a great machine. I'm really happy to be working with such a great machine.

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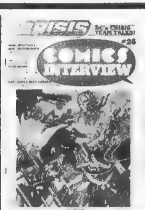

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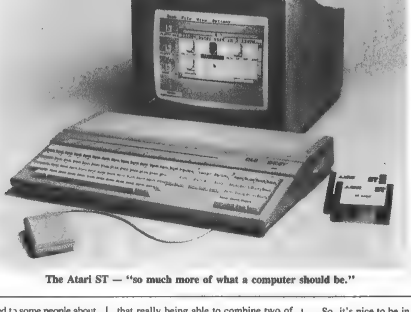
NEIL HARRIS

"I push for manuals that people can *use*."



The Atari ST — "so much more of what a computer should be."

When I first talked to some people about coming over to Atari they wouldn't give out any information on what they were working on, but they told me that they had this machine that was just great and would knock my socks off when I saw it, and it certainly has. It's so much more of what a computer is supposed to be, of what people's perceptions of computers are, than what the last generation of computers were. I think we had a big problem in the industry with people buying computers on the promise and then not having that fulfilled and being very disappointed, and I think there'll be a lot less of that with the new kind of computer.

MARTY: *Do you think it will come as a shock to anybody in the computer industry when this article is published that you are a comic-book fan?*

NEIL: I don't know. Yeah, it might, people that don't know me that well. The people that know me won't be surprised. I guess you're allowed to be eccentric to some extent.

MARTY: *Okay, and then the other side; do you think that comic-book people will be surprised to hear of an executive with Atari who is a comic-book fan like themselves?*

NEIL: I don't think that should be much of a surprise either. Computer industry people are known to be a flakey bunch. *(Laughter.)* Programmers, especially, have a reputation for being somewhat eccentric. I always try to do what I enjoy and try to have a variety of different interests. I think it's good for you. I think that really being able to combine two of my main interests, writing and computers, into my career has been a great help in making me more valuable. Every different interest I've had . . . I mean, comic books are one offshoot of liking to read. Liking to read magazines — I read a lot of different magazines — that's helped me in running the magazine I do; seeing how other people do things and being interested enough to look a little bit behind the scenes. If you're interested in comic books, then reading COMICS INTERVIEW or whatever just helps you to put everything in perspective. And people don't really understand how the computer industry works and they have a lot of very serious misconceptions. They have some great idea for things they want to see and they don't understand why it can't be.

What they don't understand is economics. That's what I've had to learn the hard way by being in business and watching it. You have to make money. You're not just altruistic. No matter how much of an evangelist I am at computers I have to have a very pragmatic understanding of what can be done for the money. Jack has taught everyone that you have to offer price as well as everything else — value for the people's money and not just a performance in your product. But people come up to me all of the time and give me suggestions of things we should add to the computer. You can take all of their suggestions and build this wonderful computer but it'll cost $10,000 and they won't buy it.

So, it's nice to be in my position for a lot of reasons. I think the one that I get the most charge out of is that there aren't really too many executives in the computer field who are really interested in computers, that really enjoy them and know a lot about them. My computer background is more informal. I learned how to program sixteen years ago now, and have just been a hobbyist and a hacker who's been able to influence the direction the computers are going so that we're doing things that make more sense with what people are really using. At Commodore I was able to help push modems out the door at the right price, and once we had modems on line I managed the Commodore information network on CompuServe and really pushed it in that direction. I helped push for manuals that people can really use instead of just having something between the covers that some engineer thinks is adequate. That's why I like working for Jack, because there are few enough people around where everybody makes a difference and if you push at it hard you can make a big difference. It's a wonderful thing!

MARTY: *And what are comic books to you? An escape valve?*

NEIL: To some extent, when I want to relax. I don't have much spare time so a novel sometimes is hard to fit into the cracks, but it doesn't take long to read a comic book so it's nice to sit back with one and look it over and enjoy it.

"The first voice I did was the cat in

JUNE FORAY

If you're too young to remember the 1960s cold war satire --ROCKY AND BULLWINKLE -- or are living somewhere other than the San Francisco Bay area where vintage ROCKY cartoons often play revival house cinemas, you may have missed out on hearing actress June Foray's distinctive "Rocky" voice.

Never fear, as Bullwinkle might say, chances are if you've seen your share of cartoons, you've heard her voice at one time or another -- probably many times. Here, in our first voice actress interview, June shares a glimpse of her fascinating Hollywood career....

SHEL DORF: *You have been in this field as a voice actress for how many years now?*

JUNE FORAY: Well, the first voice I did was the cat in CINDERELLA. When was that -- 1950, 1951? Something like that.

SHEL: *Yeah, and you're still on top. You're a living legend in the field. That was a terrible cat, wasn't it -- got after all those lovely little mice that wanted to help her.*

JUNE: Well, you see, the parts that I play aren't indicative of me. *(Laughter.)*

SHEL: *I would definitely agree with that. Broomhilda is a comic voice you've done. You did the Steven Spielberg picture, JAWS. You once told me you looped a shark sound or something, didn't you?*

JUNE: No, no, no. The two boys, their exteriors.

SHEL: *For the novice, what is looping?*

JUNE: Looping is replacing another's voice with yours. They call it looping -- although they do it electronically now, by computer. But they still call it looping, because they would put the dialogue that you had to record on a loop, and so it would just go over and over and over.

SHEL: *Until it matched the lip movements?*

JUNE: No, you had to match it. It kept going on and on and on and when they stopped the loop you knew that you had gotten it right in perfect sync.

SHEL: *Let' talk about the current projects you have been associated with.*

JUNE: Well, I am Jokey Smurf on the very successful SMURF show, and I play Mother Nature, also, on that. And, of course, I'm doing THE GUMMI BEARS currently -- it's the Disney series which is on the National Broadcasting Company, rather than the Disney Channel.

SHEL: *That was a candy, wasn't it?*

JUNE: That's what I understand. It was originally a candy.

SHEL: *That's gotta be some kind of a first, a cartoon show about a candy.*

JUNE: Yes, and now I understand they are making little cuddly bear toys -- but I guess it began with a candy, and it was made in West Germany I think.

SHEL: *Now, you first get this as a script. When you look at the script, as a voice actress, what side of your acting skills come into operation? Do you read through the whole script first?*

JUNE: When we record we read through it once. If you read a line incorrectly, or it doesn't have the depth or the meaning or the intonation that the director wants, he will tell you as you do the read-through. Usually there is no problem, and then we just go on mike and record.

SHEL: *What would be some of the things the director would say to you?*

JUNE: The director usually explains the action that occurs in the storyboard so that when you question a certain line... You say, "What is that 'Ooomph!' for?" And he says, "Well, a ton of bricks fell on his head." So you know it's that kind of an "Ooomph!" whereas if you slipped or if you were falling it would be the same sound only with a different approach.

SHEL: *I had a tour recently through Intersound Studio and watched some voice actors putting American dialogue to Japanese cartoons. Have you ever done any of that work?*

JUNE: Yes, I have. That's a little more difficult that just recording because you have more freedom when you record first. You are locked in for time and action and mouth movements in post production. In animation it isn't quite so difficult simply because the lip movements aren't as precise as live action.

SHEL: *Are you handsomely paid for this two or three minutes of voice work?*

JUNE: Quite handsomely. I don't like to say what I've received.

SHEL: *But you're the top of the line. You're the Rolls Royce of the voice actresses. I'd imagine you'd be compensated, you know, for your history and your professionalism, which brings me to another question -- what is your competition in the field? Do you have competition?*

JUNE: There are quite a few very good

CINDERELLA. When was that — 1950?"

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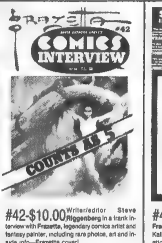

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"I'm Rocky, Bill Scott was Bullwinkle."

Photo: Robert Stone III

Jay Ward (left), who produced the incomparable ROCKY & BULLWINKLE cartoon series in his Berkeley, California garage; with June and the voice of Bullwinkle himself — Bill Scott.

people who have come up through the ranks. There is competition — however, people still call for **June Foray.** I have versatility and I'm fast.

SHEL: *Who are some of the favorite people you've worked with in your career?*

JUNE: Oh, of course, **Bill Scott,** naturally.

SHEL: *I understand you and Bill Scott had an assignment together last year.*

JUNE: Yes. *Well hokey smoke!* **Bill Scott** was Bullwinkle, my buddy — and I'm Rocky, of course — and this was the first time that the rights had been given to a company to use in a commercial, and so we recorded a Hershey Kisses commercial. If you've ever seen a BULLWINKLE SHOW you will always hear and see Bullwinkle saying, "I'm gonna pull a rabbit out of my hat." And Rocky says, "Again! That trick never works!" Well, they took that idea of Bullwinkle pulling a rabbit out of his hat, but instead of pulling a rabbit out of his hat he pulls out some Hershey Kisses.

SHEL: *Oh, that's cute.*

JUNE: Well, yeah. It's a take-off on the show. It has charm and it brought the two buddies back together again.

SHEL: *And who else have you worked with?*

JUNE: Daws Butler. Daws is very famous for Yogi Bear and, oh, many of the Hanna-Barbera films. He always did the Little Prince in FRACTURED FAIRY TALES. He was in AESOP'S FABLES with **Charlie Ruggles.** I first met Daws, actually, when we did the **Stan Freberg** records, and we were recording for Capitol Records for their children's albums. So Daws has paid his dues as well.

SHEL: *Well, you mentioned a magic name, Stan Freberg.*

JUNE: The first time I worked with Stan was when we were doing voices for SPEAKING OF ANIMALS for **Jerry Fairbanks. Ken Carpenter** would announce it — it was a live-action short, I think it was through Paramount Studios — and Daws and Stan and I would do post-production on it. They would have an animal turn to the camera and then say a word, pull a snapper of some kind.

SHEL: *They'd animate just the jaws?*

JUNE: Yes. That's where I first met Daws and Stan, and then we were put under contract to Capitol Records, the three of us and **Mel Blanc** and **Pinto Coelvig.** We all did all of the Disney shorts and the Warner shorts and features, as well as original ones that **Allen Livingston** had written. He started BOZO THE CLOWN and did those.

SHEL: *You did the voice of Granny in the TWEETY PIE cartoons.*

JUNE: Well, I did Granny shortly after I arrived at Warner Brothers. I had worked at Disney first, and what brought me over to Warners was the fact that I had one Witch Hazel in TRICK OR TREAT.

SHEL: *What is Witch Hazel?*

JUNE: Well, she plays trick or treat with Donald Duck. **Chuck Jones** had seen

"The art of animation is not just

TRICK OR TREAT, so he called me over to Warners in 1954 to do Broomstick Bunny. I did two Witch Hazels and then, of course, I became a regular for Chuck — and there were several producers and directors over there. **Friz Freleng** was one, and Friz would do the TWEETY PIE cartoons, so he hired me to do Granny. **Bea Benaderet** had done it before and I guess she'd left to do greater things on camera. That's how I started working at Warners, doing Granny and Witch Hazel.

SHEL: *And you made cartoon history. Some of those cartoons that you're in are classics. Did you get voice credit on the screen?*

JUNE: No, I did not. I think I did later, maybe in the 1960s, toward the end.

SHEL: *It's very significant to mention this.*

JUNE: Well, **Mel Blanc** had had a contract with Warners, and I think he was the only ones who ever received credit.

SHEL: *Animation historians know who did what.*

JUNE: Now they do. I think fans really were the ones who became more precise in what they wanted to know that just the animators and the writers and the directors. They were instrumental in bringing this out.

SHEL: *June, did you have any experience in radio before you got into animated cartoons?*

JUNE: Oh, yes. I started in radio when I was twelve years old, and then I came out as a teenager, with my mother and father, to California, and I started writing and performing in my own shows out here. Then, through friends who admired my work — I was doing play reading at the time, besides writing — I was doing more writing, actually, than performing. A friend of mine who was doing radio heard me in a play reading and said I should be working in radio. He showed me the ropes and instructed me on where to go and what to do, how to do it, whom to meet.

SHEL: *Do you remember some of your voices? Like, were you in soap operas or were you in LUX THEATER or . . .*

JUNE: Yes, I did several LUX THEATERs. I did RED RYDER and THE COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO and, of course, I worked for my husband, Hobart Donovan, on THE BUSTER BROWN SHOW for **Smilin' Ed McConnell.**

Later, I auditioned for **Steve Allen.** He and **Wendell Nobel** had just arrived from Phoenix and they had a show on the Mutual Network called SMILETIME and they were very unhappy with the girl whom they employed as the girlfriend on it, so they held voice tests and a friend of mine told me about it. She said, "They called me and I can't do voices. I can only do one. You do several. Why don't you voice test for them?" Which I did and I was hired immediately. So, I started working for Hobart and **Steve Allen** in the same year, and then all of a sudden the complexion of my career took an upward swing and I was working on THE JIMMY DURANTE SHOW every week, THE DANNY THOMAS SHOW, THE PHIL HARRIS SHOW.

Anyway, it was radio that got me into my Capitol Records contract, and it was my Capitol Records contract that insinuated itself into my career and started me on my career in animation. That's what I've been in ever since.

SHEL: *You've done more than just be the voice in animated cartoons. You've gotten into the whole animation scene, haven't you?*

JUNE: My career was certainly on the ascendancy in animation in the '50s and the '60s. In 1965 I attended my first international animated festival in Romania. I became acquainted with artists all over

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June Foray

The animated voice of cartoon favorites

the world, from Russia, India, Finland, Denmark, Holland, France, Germany, Italy — and I realized that these are the people who created jobs for people like me. I felt that I certainly owed animators and artists a debt of gratitude for my expanding career and my way of life, because it's been most lucrative and remunerative — and so when I came back to Hollywood I realized, after having been to this international festival, which was sponsored by ASIFA...

SHEL: *What does that stand for?*

JUNE: Association Internationale des Film Animation. Translated it's the International Animated Film Association.

SHEL: *What kind of work did they do?*

JUNE: These were all artists who joined hands — it was chartered by the United Nations — people all over the world united to make films, to show them at international festivals, nationally, internationally, and to win prizes with juries of their own peers.

SHEL: *To sort of give each other an understanding of each other's culture?*

JUNE: Absolutely. This was created in 1960.

SHEL: *Kind of late in the game. Was there anything else like that before?*

JUNE: No. It's the first of its kind and I think it remains the only one of its kind in the world.

SHEL: *Well, June, was there an animation organization, say, in Yugoslavia? Were they making animated films in 1942 in Yugoslavia?*

JUNE: Apparently, they were. They were making them all over the world. As a matter of fact, there was a man in France who was doing it in the late 19th century. And, of course, **Winsor McCay,** who was a political cartoonist; he made one of the first animated films, GERTIE THE DINOSAUR.

SHEL: *And, of course, Winsor McCay went on to do LITTLE NEMO IN SLUMBERLAND. Which is why we're here in COMICS INTERVIEW magazine today. He was sort of like the father of American animation.*

JUNE: Well, there's a marvelous liaison between cartoonists and animators; it's just that the cartoons move.

SHEL: *So it became important for you to know the history of this business that you were in as well?*

JUNE: Yes, and I felt that it needed preservation. It needed promotion. The art of animation is not just for children. It's an adult artform. Unfortunately, not too many people realize this. The Warner Brothers films, all of those wonderful TOM AND JERRYs at MGM — these were made for adults, not children. And, as a result, ASIFA-Hollywood started, I think, about 1962. It was '61 or '62, very shortly after the international organization was formed: and there were about eight or ten people who belonged.

SHEL: *What did you do? You were one of the charter members?*

"We reach a point where we can say we've

JUNE: No, I wasn't a charter member. I came in about a year or so after it started. Then I attended the festivals in Yugoslavia and France and Romania — they have them now in Bulgaria and in Japan. Last year I attended the first international one in Hiroshima. The theme of that was peace and love. It was my third time to Tokyo — three years ago I spent a month there touring the studios, interviewing people, going to recording sessions: I wrote a four-page magazine article on Japanese animation.

SHEL: *And this appeared in Japan?*

JUNE: It appeared here in the United States.

SHEL: *What was the name of the magazine?*

JUNE: GRAFITTI. I have really written many, many articles for magazines, on animation, and as a result I guess they admired what I was doing.

SHEL: *What kind of a program did they have set up for this Hiroshima peace and love festival?*

JUNE: It was based on other festivals where they had competition. The theme was peace and love, and the 9 to 10 schedule every morning in the theater was called Panorama, and that's when they played all of the peace films. You would think that somebody from behind the Iron Curtain wouldn't think of peace: well, people do think of peace. Artists, I think — artists, musicians, actors, people in the creative field — are people to people. They are not governments. They are people who love other people. It doesn't matter whether they're black or green or red or yellow, what their politics are — they have their families, their loves. We are all the same. So when I saw these films from Czechoslovakia — **Pojar** is from Czechoslovakia, he made two films for the United Nations, on peace — the most brilliant, heart-warming, stimulating films — anti-war films — and you cannot help but feel warmth for people who think this way. And most cartoonists do. I think you know that.

SHEL: *I'm really prejudiced; I think cartoonists are the best people in the world.*

JUNE: Well, animators are the same. It's a kindred profession. They finally came to the conclusion, they were saying we reach a certain point in civilization where we can say we've got to save civilization from our leaders — and they came to the conclusion that the only thing that will save the world is education: education of the children and education of their parents. And they feel that they can do it with animation. Just as the musicians who travel. Look at **Louis Armstrong.** Wasn't he sent to Russia?

SHEL: *As a cultural ambassador.*

JUNE: Yes. He was sent to Moscow.

SHEL: *The arts have always been sort of a bridge between people.*

JUNE: It's a common denominator.

SHEL: *But I don't think you'll ever get evil out of the world. There's always people who — from the minute they are born to the minute they die — are bad people, and we have to co-exist with these people. You say the only hope for the world...*

JUNE: Is education, yes.

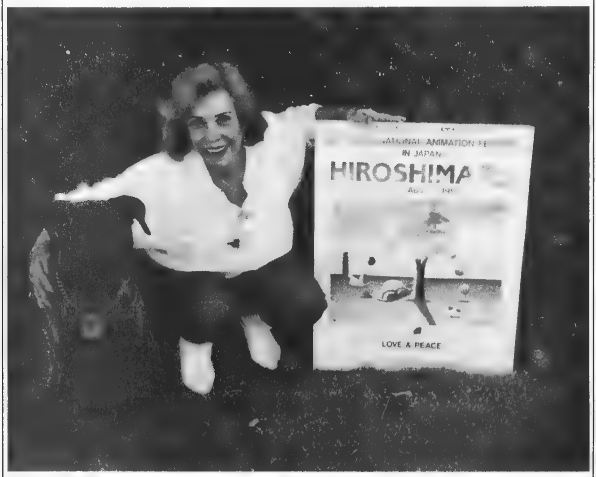

Photo: Shel Dorf

got to save civilization from our leaders."

SHEL: *But are you going to reach into the barrio and educate the gangs? Their whole existence is just to fight one another and to exert peer pressure, and to them it's important. It's their pride — their image — to be tough and to be brutal. How is education going to change that?*

JUNE: How can they be somebody if they have no jobs, they're not well educated, they come perhaps from a bilingual home where the parents don't understand how to survive? These kids, in order to attain — whether it's the wrong way to go or not — they still attain this macho image that "I am better than you are, more powerful than you, look at me." So maybe they feel that they're being admired because they are the gang leader.

SHEL: *Okay, how is animation going to change this?*

JUNE: Animation can teach gentleness and humanism. That's what stories can teach. They teach *love*. Love is so important in the world. We hear of crime because crime is so predominant in our cities now, but you take the billions of people who are on Earth, most of them are family-loving people who just want enough to survive. They want running water. They want toilets. They want enough to eat. How often have you talked to oppressed people who say, "I want my children to have an education that I didn't have." Haven't you heard this?

SHEL: *Yes.*

JUNE: *Thousands* of times you've heard this. The majority of the world is a decent majority.

SHEL: *I look at our pioneer ancestors who settled the country and, you know, lived in a very primitive way — they didn't have the creature comforts that we have — and I see somebody getting desperate because the electric toothbrush doesn't work; I say we've got to go back to basics. There are a lot of wrongs in the world. Do you see any progress being made?*

JUNE: Oh, sure. We have our setbacks — of course we do — but I think people are basically, unless they are emotionally swayed, they are basically decent people. That's what makes our country so wonderful. Maybe people lose their heads for awhile but, boy, when it comes right down to basics they are right there! The American people are damn good people.

SHEL: *You think, on the whole, the majority of the world's people are good people?*

JUNE: I feel that way. It's the power hungry beasts who are just unacceptable, and eventually you throw the rascals out.

SHEL: *Are you a fan of Hilton's book LOST HORIZON?*

JUNE: Oh, yes. It was such a healthy and idealistic life, wasn't it?

SHEL: *The philosophy of that book, and the Frank Capra film, it still hasn't been equalled I think. It was beautiful.*

JUNE: I think the pictures of the '40s. . . they seemed more idealistic, didn't they?

SHEL: *Yeah, and we really had problems. When Conway, the character played by Ronald Coleman, had his meeting with the High Lama and the High Lama described the world, the chaos in the world and everything, and how there in Shangri-la they had eliminated this, and Conway asked what if two men are fighting over a woman, you know, the answer was they have no argument. It's gracious for one man to let the other man have the woman. This is something that is probably a little hard to be able to do. I mean, when someone else wants the one you love, this is a war situation.*

JUNE: Except, doesn't the woman have something to say about it? How dare a man say he'll give her to another man!

SHEL: *Very well put.* (Laughter.)

JUNE: But we all want our Shangri-las, and I think we try to live them as best we can.

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"SUPERMAN #1 failed. SUPERMAN #2 was worse, #3 was an abomination."

Few people would accuse film critic Neal Gabler of fence-sitting -- when he has something to say, he says it, as you'll immediately see in this brief dynamic jawbone session that deals with how comics have fared as films. You may recall Neal from his former PBS TV series, SNEAK PREVIEWS. . .

DAN HAGEN: *So many films these days have their origins not in great literature but, in effect, in comic books. Do you take that as simple fun or does it bother you?*

NEAL GABLER: It doesn't bother me. The only thing that would ever bother me, that does bother me — I'm a great believer both politically and aesthetically in pluralism. There ought to be movies for everybody. There ought to be movies for teenagers and there ought to be POLICE ACADEMYs — so long as they're well-made I certainly won't begrudge anybody that — and there ought to be TENDER MERCYs and there ought to be INDIANA JONESes. There ought to be a whole range of movies.

DAN: *Let me throw out some film series. I want to see if you think they've gone to the well once too often, or if there's material there yet to be mined. What about SUPERMAN?*

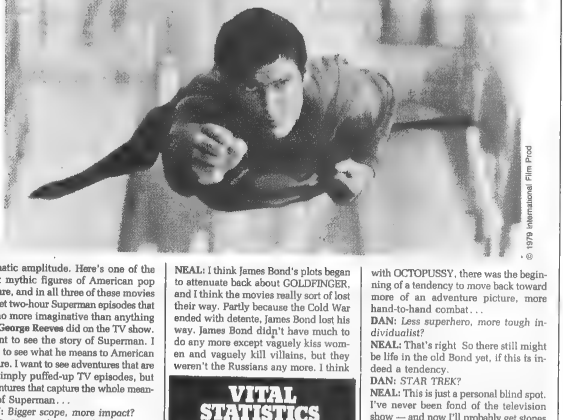
NEAL: Just between you and me and your readers, I think it failed with number one. Number two was worse and number three was an abomination.

DAN: *You didn't like the first one? I really loved it.*

NEAL: I didn't like it. I think that **Christopher Reeve** is competent. I don't think that the people who made the movie ever understood what it was they were trying to do. The film has no

NEAL GABLER

"I've never been fond of the STAR



thematic amplitude. Here's one of the great mythic figures of American pop culture, and in all three of these movies we get two-hour Superman episodes that are no more imaginative than anything that **George Reeves** did on the TV show. I want to see the story of Superman. I want to see what he means to American culture. I want to see adventures that are not simply puffed-up TV episodes, but adventures that capture the whole meaning of Superman...

DAN: *Bigger scope, more impact?*

NEAL: Yes, and apparently that's what **Mario Puzo**, who was the original screenwriter, had intended. When Puzo wrote the original — which was changed radically — his idea was that he was going to do to SUPERMAN what he did to THE GODFATHER. He was going to make the saga of this superhero who was, in a way, almost trapped by his identity, and it would have been a very powerful tragedy.

Too often, they play it simply for the comic value and not for anything more that that. SUPERMAN could have been funny, dramatic, tragic and exciting, most of all. And for me, it was none of those things.

DAN: *INDIANA JONES?*

NEAL: I think in some ways, INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM was better than RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK. In some ways it was less. In sum total, I'd have to say I enjoyed it more. That doesn't mean it's better necessarily, but I got more enjoyment out of it. It's more playful, I think, than RAIDERS, particularly in the opening. But whether it's better or worse is ultimately irrelevant, because it delivers.

DAN: *The James Bond series?*

NEAL: I think James Bond's plots began to attenuate back about GOLDFINGER, and I think the movies really sort of lost their way. Partly because the Cold War ended with detente, James Bond lost his way. James Bond didn't have much to do any more except vaguely kiss women and vaguely kill villains, but they weren't the Russians any more. I think with OCTOPUSSY, there was the beginning of a tendency to move back toward more of an adventure picture, more hand-to-hand combat...

DAN: *Less superhero, more tough individualist?*

NEAL: That's right. So there still might be life in the old Bond yet, if this is indeed a tendency.

DAN: *STAR TREK?*

NEAL: This is just a personal blind spot. I've never been fond of the television show — and now I'll probably get stones thrown through my window — and I've never been fond of the movies. I don't respond to them at all. My wife watches STAR TREK and enjoys it and can't understand why I'm left totally cold by it. There's not a flicker, not a gram of interest that I have in any of those characters, in any of their situations, in the philosophical veneer that's slapped over them.

DAN: *What about DIRTY HARRY?*

NEAL: I love DIRTY HARRY. I love **Clint Eastwood**. I don't think any of the movies hold a candle to the original, and MAGNUM FORCE is downright awful. But DIRTY HARRY is a classic. I used to show that in my classes to students because I think it's an extraordinarily well-made, exciting and complex movie as well. SUDDEN IMPACT, I think, is probably the second best. There's an incredible pleasure in watching **Clint Eastwood** do what he does, and he does it so well.

DAN: *What about GREYSTOKE as a variation on the Tarzan thing? Did you like that?*

NEAL: I did not. I will say that it was beautifully mounted. It looks like one postcard picture after another. But I also

VITAL STATISTICS

Name: Neal Gabler

Occupation: Author, professor, film critic

Background: Graduated Summa Cum Laude and Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Michigan, where he taught film for four years and won the outstanding Teaching Award before moving on to Penn State University. He is the former co-host of SNEAK PREVIEWS on PBS. Since 1969, he has seen an average of 200 films per year.

Passions besides movies: Baseball.

Movies He Loves: CITIZEN KANE, IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE, THE GODFATHER, THE DEERHUNTER

Bad Movies He Loves Nevertheless: THE OTHER SIDE OF MIDNIGHT, ROLLING THUNDER, MOMMIE DEAREST. I have tons of 'em, and I'm not guilty about a single one. I don't believe in guilty pleasures. Brecht, I think, once said that nothing needs less justification than pleasure. Boy, I'm with him!

TREK t.v. show — I'm left totally cold."

think that it lacks anything beyond beauty. I don't think **Christopher Lambert** begins to create on the screen any of the tragedies that are obviously dividing Tarzan. I think it's simplistic thematically. It's a really empty movie intellectually. Aside from the ape stuff in the beginning, which is very beautifully done, I was just bored by it. I wasn't interested in him, I wasn't interested in the situation, I wasn't interested in what the movie had to say, which I've seen 10,000 times — that civilization is really the jungle and the jungle is really civilization.

The curious thing is, **Johnny Weismuller** is much more poignant. I know this will sound ridiculous if you're reading it in cold print, but I watch those movies. They play here in New York every Sunday morning. And there's really poignance in that character, in what **Weismuller** is able to convey — this individual who is simple but knows his values very, very well. I think GREYSTOKE, in trying to appeal to the upscale audience, is the equivalent of a coffee table book.

DAN: *Pretty to look at, but nothing you can delve into very deeply?*

NEAL: Right. If you see a beautiful woman who opens her mouth and has nothing to say, you don't say, "Boy, I love that woman." You say she's good-looking but she's got nothing to say.

DAN: *We went through a sort of an anti-hero period there in the '50s to late '60s. And then — maybe with ROCKY — romanticism came back, reaffirmed by STAR WARS and SUPERMAN and all that. Do you agree and to what do you attribute that sort of philosophical shift?*

NEAL: I agree and I attribute it to a number of things. One — and I don't think the film critics have paid nearly enough attention to this — if you remember when ROCKY came out, it was the Bicentennial. If you want to date this thing, you can even date it to JAWS in '75.

If you look at what JAWS is about, it's about obviously an obstacle, and three different approaches to overcoming the obstacle. One is science — **Richard Dreyfuss** — which failed. Two, a kind of magic — a spiritual, non-intellectual approach — which was **Robert Shaw**. Then finally the common man, who by common sense and by being compelled to fall back on his own resources, rises to the fore and conquers, and that's **Roy Scheider**.

I think all of that plugged into the whole sense of the Bicentennial. We became full of ourselves. We became full of the mythology on which this country has been promulgated almost since its inception — the myth of the common man and the power of the common man. And ROCKY, obviously, is one of the more powerful expressions of this whole idea that in America, anybody can make it.

With Vietnam over, with the Bicentennial occurring, with audiences getting younger and, because of their youth, not knowing the old formulas — they've never seen **Frank Capra** movies. So when ROCKY comes along, it's their first exposure to something that those of us who know **Frank Capra** movies and know the movies of the '30s and the '40s have been exposed to for years and years. For them, AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN or a ROCKY is brand new. The formula is not a formula.

So I think all of those things fed into a sense of clarity — moral clarity, good guys and bad guys without anti-heroes any more — and a simplification because of that clarity. A movie that's likely to be thematically complex isn't likely to attract much of an audience, because teenagers just aren't interested.

"They've never seen Frank Capra movies." The immortal Jimmy Stewart in the unforgettable climax of IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE. . . . "Bert, look! Zuzu's petals. I'm alive again!"

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RIGHT ON TARGET

Dear COMICS INTERVIEW —

First, thankyou thankyou thankyou for the terrific **Charles Schulz** interview in issue #47. Despite some recent detractors — (it seems highly in fashion to rip on PEANUTS these days), Sparky remains as magical and fully in-touch with the human condition as ever, not to mention hilarious — the new Sophie character ("here I go") always doubles me over. Again, much thanks.

Gary Delamore
79 S. 7th St.
San Jose, CA 95112

A QUESTION OF OBSCENITY

Dear David,

Issue #48 was another good one, with a wide range of interview subjects being covered, yet having something of a "theme" (ie. the Watchmen). It wasn't quite an all-inclusive, in depth look at the Watchmen, but it was interesting to get some different perspectives on that incredible phenomenon.

In the **R.A. Jones** interview, there seemed to be some question as to the "obscenity" and obviousness of the (in)famous gesture by the Scarlet Witch as reprinted on page 49. I think I'll leave the delicate question of its alleged "obscenity" to others, but to me it was quite an obvious gesture and definitely, um, uncomplimentary. Certainly, that gesture can be provocative and is quite capable of inciting conflicts, both verbal and physical!

While I am not in the business of defending the subscription services and don't want to beat the matter to death, I feel I should respond to the comments made on the subject by **Gary Kimber** in the lettercol. He analyzes a week's worth of his comics purchases and concludes that his cost of CDN$18.24 from a retailer gives him a savings of CDN$1.11 over the cost of CDN$18.24 for the same comics from a subscription service. However, this hinges on the fact that he apparently gets 20¢ off the price of each comic from his retailer. This is not common, in my experience. If you adjust for that (including the additional provincial sales tax) the retail cost comes to CDN$21.24 — which is CDN$1.89 more than the subscription service cost. And, in answer to your comment, David — and to be fair to Gary — though it is a more certain form of acquiring the comics you want, a subscription service cannot *guarantee* that every person who orders a comic will get it. Problems in ordering and in supply can still develop, especially since (as I understand it), subscription services must order their comics before they receive the orders from their customers. That said, it is of course much easier to miss a comic on the stands than it is to miss it when dealing with a service.

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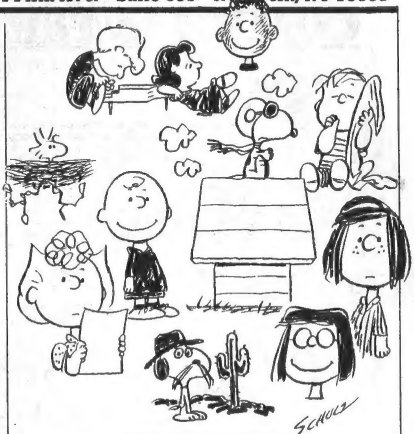

NOT ANTI-WAR

Dear Dave,

I could write you a long LOC considering the anti-war comics coverage you did in the latest CI, but we'll have to wait on that. Suffice it to say, while I'm very much anti-agression, I'm *not* anti-war. If we put down our weapons right now and swore not to use them again, the Other Side would probably put down theirs, too. Right on our heads. And to all the others who may be listening out there... well, let's just see how long your ideals hold when Israel is next attacked by the Arabs. War is the most terrible activity a human being can engage in, probably. But there may come times when you will bloody well have to do it. And the less we kid ourselves about that, the more realistic we will be.

Lou Mougin
1406 Fourth St.
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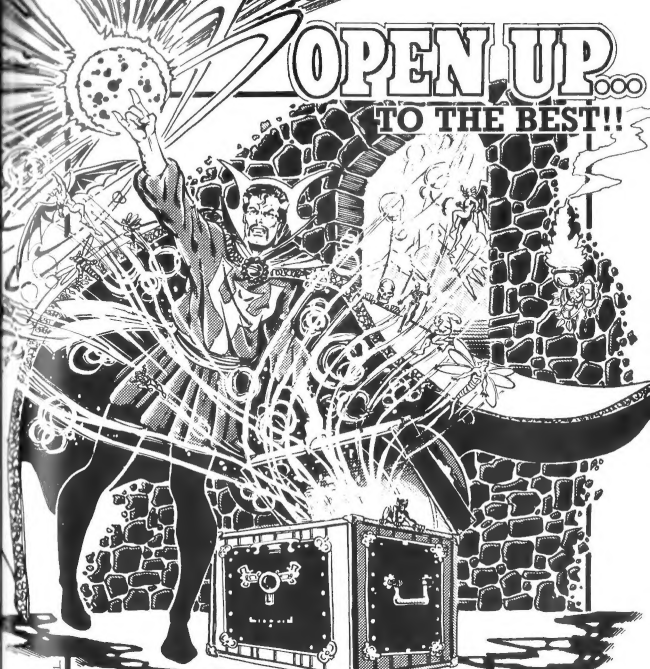

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Comics Interview

So far, there are only four titles from David Anthony Kraft's publishing company, but I like all of them.

• *MICRA* is an acronym for *M*ind *C*ontrolled *R*emote *A*utomaton. It is also one heck of a good comic book by Lamar Waldron and Ted Boonthanakit. This is a 12-issue limited series about a crippled woman who can project her consciousness into an automaton (see the title).

That is a much-too-simplified summation of a rich, complex SF novel in comic-book form. Ted's art has been compared to many different American artists (none of whose work Ted has seen; he was born in Thailand and grew up in Africa) and is remarkably clear and exciting.

Grade: A.

MICRA™
MIND CONTROLLED REMOTE AUTOMATON

• *Aristocratic X-traterrestrial Time-Traveling Thieves* (*X-Thieves* for short) has had two first issues, which is annoying to indexers and compilers of price guides, but the bright, sprightly scripts by Henry Vogel and the appropriately humorous art of Mark Propst make up for that. One of the main features of this comic book is that, like the *Mad* comic books, the panels are filled with gags, such as the crisis hotline which warns: "New universe forming — disaster imminent!"

The Southern Knights make a guest appearance in the second first issue, in which the X-Thieves steal the formula for original Coca-Cola. This is one of the best of the funny comic books (and one of the handful that really *is* funny).

Grade: A.

X-THIEVES™

SOUTHERN KNIGHTS™

• I haven't seen the last couple of issues of *Southern Knights* yet but, unless the series has gone radically downhill since #16, this is still one of the best and most original of all the supergroups. Grade: A.

• While *Comics Interview* is not a comic book, I think I can squeeze in a recommendation. This excellent publication gives a well-rounded view of the industry, with interviews with writers, pencillers, inkers, letterers, colorists, and others.

Naturally, your interest in an issue will depend on who is being interviewed, but there have been 40 issues of *Comics Interview* and no totally dull ones — not even the *G.I. Joe* issue. Grade: A.

Four titles.
Four As. Four for four. Way to go, Dave.

— Don Thompson
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